To study outcome in patients of extra articular distal tibia fractures managed with interlocking nail

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Abstract

As surface of tibia is subcutaneous along most of its length and its vascular supply of tibia is perilous compared to any other bone surrounded by heavy muscles? These type of fracture are often associated with compartment syndrome or neuro-vascular injuries. As there is existence of hinge joint at the knee and the ankle that permits no adjustment for rotational deformity after fracture, distinctive care is being required during reduction of these type of fractures to correct such deformity.

The problems associated with fixation of distal tibia fractures include local and deep infections, local implant irritation, knee pain, stiffness of ankle, transient peroneal nerve palsy, malalignment and subsequent malunion and non-union.

This study deals with the ability to maintain a mechanically stable reduction in extraarticular distal one third tibia fractures managed with intramedullary nailing.

Materials and Methods: This was a hospital based prospective study on the outcome in 20 patients of extra articular distal one-third tibia fractures, who will be admitted in the Department of Orthopaedics of Muzaffarnagar Medical College, Muzaffarnagar over a period of 18 months.

Results: Mean age of patients was 39.05 years (18-80). Fracture union was seen radiologically within 3 to 6 months depending upon the pattern of fracture.

Conclusion: We conclude that fractures of extraarticular distal one-third tibia with or without associated fractures of fibula managed with closed intramedullary nailing had least number of complications, allows early partial weight bearing and 95% of the patients achieved union by the end of 6 months. Thorough planning and placement of the nail at the center of a wide metaphysis in anteroposterior and lateral view is essential to overcome varus, valgus and posterior tilt.

Keywords: Distal one-third tibia fracture, interlock nailing, extraarticular tibia fracture

Introduction

Tibial fractures are the most common fractures of long bone, with incidence of 492,000 fractures annually. As tibia is one of the chief load bearing bones of the lower extremity, therefore, tibial fractures can lead to widespread disability, sustained morbidity unless the treatment is appropriate.

As the surface of tibia is subcutaneous along most of its length and its vascular supply of tibia is perilous compared to any other bone surrounded by heavy muscles. These type of fractures are often associated with compartment syndrome or neuro-vascular injuries. As there is existence of hinge joint at the knee and the ankle that permits no adjustment for rotational deformity after fracture, distinctive care is being required during reduction of these type of fractures to correct such deformity. The problems associated with fixation of distal tibia fractures include local and deep infections, local implant irritation, knee pain, stiffness of ankle, transient peroneal nerve palsy, malalignment and subsequent malunion and non-union. Various options in management of distal fractures according to pattern of fracture and the soft tissue damage around the fracture are closed reduction and cast, intramedullary nailing, plates and screws fixation and external fixation. Non-operative treatment of these fractures has become less popular due to inadequate reduction, stiffness of ankle, malalignment leading to subsequent malunion and problems of cast disease. The two most commonly practiced methods for management of distal tibial fractures are closed reduction and internal fixation either with intramedullary (IM) nailing or plates and screws.

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There is an ongoing debate regarding which one is superior over the other especially in cases of distal tibial fracture not involving ankle joint. We assumed that better results might be obtained when distal meta-diaphyseal fractures are managed by intramedullary (IM) nailing. As metaphyseal diameter is larger than the diameter of the nail, malalignment is a common problem encountered in distal third tibial fractures.\(^5\)

To encounter this problem, recent advances in intramedullary nailing have been made which has permitted surgeons to stabilize distal tibial fractures using multiplanar locking options. The evaluation of use of poller screws (blocking screws) and fibular plating as a addition to fixation along with statically locked IM nail of small diameter is also being done.

Looking at the encouraging results of this device in fractures of distal tibia as reported in literature, we planned to study the outcome in patients of extra articular distal tibial fractures managed with interlocked intramedullary nails.

Advantages of closed intramedullary nail over plating

1. In closed intramedullary nailing the fracture hematoma is preserved that is essential for healing of fracture thereby increasing the chances of union.
2. Intramedullary nail is a load sharing device, therefore early weight bearing can be started as compared to plating that is a load bearing device and weight bearing is started after union.
3. Better rotational stability as a result of proximal and distal locking screws.
4. Short duration of surgery, decreased soft tissue damage, decreased blood loss thereby decreased chances of infection.
5. Reaming in nailing technique itself acts as a bone graft thereby aids in union.

Reamed intramedullary nails are being preferred in cases of closed fractures of distal one third tibia as it allows the use larger diameter nail and therefore promoting fracture stability and union.\(^6, 7\) The solid nails (reamed nails) are nowadays preferred over external fixator.

Evaluation of soft tissue is most critical in the management of tibia fractures as most of it is subcutaneous. A close look for presence of swelling, blisters is required and for subsequent planning for delay in surgery. Haemorrhagic blisters indicate skin necrosis which needs special attention.

Duration of surgery is determined by the condition of soft tissue. Simple fractures can be managed within 6-8 hours. For other cases surgery can be delayed once the skin condition is good and swelling subsides. Elevation of the limb, drugs to relieve edema, Magnesium sulphate dressing can be used to relieve edema.

### Materials and Methods

Cases are classified based on AO classification:

### AO Classification

- Type A: Extra-articular fractures
- A 1: Simple metaphyseal fracture
- A2: Metaphyseal wedge fracture
- A3: Complex metaphyseal fracture

### Source of data

This was a hospital based prospective study on the outcome in 20 patients of distal one-third tibia fractures managed with interlocking nailing, who will be admitted in the Department of Orthopaedics of Muzaffarnagar Medical College, Muzaffarnagar over a period of 18 months.

### Inclusion criteria

1. Extra articular distal Tibia fractures.
2. Patients with age above 18 years.

### Exclusion criteria

1. Fractures located above the junction of proximal two-third and distal one-third.
2. Intra-articular extension of fractures.
3. All Pathological fractures.
4. Open distal tibial fractures.
5. Deformed tibia.
6. Previous history of infection in ipsilateral foot or lower limb.
7. Known case of osteomyelitis of tibia.

### Investigations

1. Haemogram
2. Renal profile
3. Coagulation profile
4. Urine routine
5. Viral markers (by rapid method)
6. Random Blood Sugar
7. Electrocardiogram (E.C.G)

Chest X-Ray P.A view, X-Ray Anterio Posterior (AP) and Lateral view of knee with leg and ankle with leg. Anesthesia team performed preanesthetic evaluation.

### Operative technique: Intramedullary nailing

Surgery performed under spinal anesthesia with tourniquet and under image intensifier on radiolucent fracture table. Surgical site prepared scrubbed, painted and draped. Surgery was done under tourniquet to avail a bloodless operative field and to minimalize the blood loss.

- By traction and manipulation, reduction was attempted. A ball tipped guide wire was then inserted down the medullary cavity through the entry point. In presence of fluoroscopy guidance, the guided wire was advanced distally after reducing the fracture until it reached the subchondral bone above the ankle. Guide must be central in both Antero-posterior and lateral view.
- Reaming of medullary canal was carried out with sharp cutting cannulated reamers, while keeping the knee in flexion while reaming, assistant holds the reduction. After reaming, ball tipped guide wire was replaced with non-ball tipped one using exchange tube. Position of reamers is checked with help of C-arm. Appropriate size of the nail was estimated with the help of calibrated scale. The nail was mounted over the insertion handle assembly and inserted through the entry portal in to the medullary canal after manually manipulating the fracture, nail was advanced through the fracture site. Insertion was supported by gentle blows using slotted hammer.
  - Proximal and distal interlocking is done by fixation with screws by free hand technique under image intensifier control.
  - Polar screws or temporary k wires was very useful to direct the nail in central position.
  - Post-operative physiotherapy regime was started. Patients were encouraged to do active toe movements on day of surgery. Mobilisation of ankle and knee of the affected side was done on first post op day. Patients were encouraged to sit on 2nd post op day with operated limb hanging from bed side and encouraged to actively mobilise knee and ankle. Non-weight bearing toe touch
ambulation was started as soon as pain was bearable and patient could perform active SLR. Anti-biotics (I.V./Oral) were continued till wound condition obliges. Intra venous antibiotics were administered for 72 hours post-surgery and oral antibiotics were sustained for 5 days. Suture removal performed at 12th-14th post-operative day depending on situation of the wound and check x rays were done.

- Patients were be followed up in the out patients department monthly for up to six months. On each visit, local site was looked for any signs of inflammation, infection, range of motion of ankle and knee was assessed, ambulatory status of the patient was documented and X rays of the involved limb were taken.
- Results were assessed.

**Observations and Results**

The following observations were made from the data collected during study of outcome of extra articular distal tibia fractures managed with interlocking nails in the department of Orthopaedics, Muzaffarnagar Medical College. This study included 20 patients with age, ranging from 18 years to 80 years with a mean age of 39.05 (range, 18-80 years). It was observed that distal one third fractures of tibia were more common amongst young and middle aged people, with greater occurrence observed in 3rd and 4th decade of life.

![Age distribution](image)

Fig 1: Age of patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avg. age (Mean ± SD) (years)</th>
<th>39.05 ± 15.57</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Range (years)</td>
<td>18-80</td>
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![Distribution of patients according to gender](image)

Fig 2: Distribution of patients according to gender

**Ratio of Female to Male patients- 1:3**

Out of 20 patients taking part in our study, 15 of our patients were males and 5 were females (male: female = 3:1). Therefore, there has been greater occurrence of distal tibial fracture among males.

The most common cause of distal tibial fractures was as a result of road side accidents. Of the 20 cases, in most cases (70% of 14 cases) it is the most common mode of injury resulting in distal tibial fractures. Other reasons were fall (20%, 4 patients) followed by assault (10%, 2 cases). Amongst the 5 female patients taking part in our study, two resulted in distal tibia fractures due to road traffic accident and remaining had history of fall, most among them were trivial.

![Distribution of patients as per mode of injury](image)

Fig 3: Distribution of patients as per mode of injury

All of distal tibia fractures were graded according to AO/OTA classification and more than half of these were type A2 fractures. A3 (1 patient, 5.00%) was the least common sub type.

![Distribution of patients according to type of fracture](image)

Fig 4: Distribution of patients according to type of fracture

The average time of full weight bearing is 8.3 weeks. The decision to allow full weight was taken on patient to patient basis. It was started by 6 weeks in 5 patients, 8 weeks in 9 patient, and 10 weeks in 4 patients, by 12 weeks in 2 patients.
Out of 20 patients, infection was observed in one patient. This patient had deep infection of proximal locking site. Malunion was observed in two patients (10%). All two had valgus malalignment. Metal works failure was reported in two patients. The first patient had a prominent interlocking bolt from proximal interlocking site causing pain and second patient had concomitant intramedullary k-wire fixation of fibula causing pain.

In our study, ankle pain (35%) was the most common complaint amongst the patients trailed by swelling (15%), anterior knee pain (10%) and pain at fracture site (5%). Furthermore, patients of angular malunion went to develop ankle pain in future.
Fig 10: Distribution of complications among patients

Preoperative X-Ray

Postoperative X-Ray

3rd month follow-up

6th month follow-up

Case 1
Discussion
The present study enrolled a total of twenty patients. One patient had isolated fractures of distal third tibia and one patient had segmental fracture of fibula. The mean hospital stay was 11.2 days among the patients studied.

Age/Sex distribution: This study included twenty patients with age, ranging from eighteen years to eighty years with a mean age of 39.05 (range, 18-80) years. Out of these, 15 were males and 5 were females (Male: Female = 3: 1). Majority of comminuted fractures of distal third tibia were observed in young and middle aged patients. Nine patients were treated for a right sided fracture and eleven patients were treated for left sided fractures.

The other studies of distal tibia fractures have also reported mean age of 38-48.1 years with male preponderance. Vallier et al., (2011) assessed plate versus intramedullary nail fixation in one hundred four patients sustaining extra-articular distal tibia shaft fractures with a mean age of 38 years (range, 18-95 years). Of these, eighty five patients were males and nineteen were females. Hence, our study correlates with above mentioned reports. We conclude that fractures of distal end of tibia are more common in young and middle aged populations. The reason behind this being that these age groups are more often involved in outdoor activities making them more prone to injuries.

Mode of Injury
Out of twenty patients, more than two-thirds (70%, 14 patients) suffered distal tibia fractures as result of road traffic accidents. Other causes were fall (20%, 4 patients) followed by assault (10%, 2 patients). Among the 5 female patients in our study, only 2 sustained injury due to road traffic accident and rest had a history of fall, majority of which were trivial. Begkas et al. (2014) evaluated forty two patients with aseptic non-union of distal third tibia fractures. They observed that road traffic accidents (69%) caused maximum number of tibia fractures in their study followed by fall from height (19%).

Other authors have also observed that majority of distal tibia fractures are a result of road traffic accidents followed by falls, this is a cause of concern especially in a developing country like India, given the high population density in large urban areas. The second factor contributing to it is dramatic increase in vehicle ownership in our State of Uttar Pradesh in last few years and poor traffic discipline has only made matters worse.

Fracture grading
Among the 20 patients enrolled in this study of distal tibial fractures, the fractures were graded according to AO/OTA classification. It was observed that out of 20 fractures, 7 were graded as Grade A1, 12 were graded as Grade A2, 1 was Grade A3. Paraschou et al., (2009) evaluated the results of intramedullary nailing in the treatment of extra-articular distal tibial fractures and non-unions. Out of thirty five fractures, thirty one were closed and four were open. The fractures were classified according to AO/OTA classification. Twenty seven fractures were type A 1, 6 fractures were A2 and 2 fractures were A3.

As compared to above mentioned study. In our study A3 was the least common type of fracture and A2 being the most common grade presenting among population.

Full Weight Bearing
Full weight bearing walking was started after clinical and radiological healing of fracture. The average time of full weight bearing was 7.9 weeks. The decision to allow full weight was taken on patient to patient basis keeping in mind the associated injuries as well. It was started by 6 weeks in 5 patients, 8 weeks in 9 patients, 10 weeks in 4 patients, 12
weeks in 2 patients. Guo J et al. (2010) [9] conducted a study on 85 patients with distal tibia fractures, out of which 44 were managed with interlocking nails. The authors allowed partial weight-bearing usually around 6 weeks after operation when there was radiological evidence of progress towards unions. A decision regarding full weight-bearing was made on an individual basis, depending on the progression of union. The patients were followed up clinically and radiologically at intervals of six weeks until bony union was achieved.

Fracture union/Non-union
Union had been defined radiologically as the presence of bridging callus in 3 or more cortices seen in biplane radio graphs without fracture site pain on full weight bearing. Out of 20 fractures of distal tibia included our study, 19 fractures united and 1 in delayed union. The average time to union was 18.45 weeks. We observed delayed union in one patient. Vallier et al. (2011) [10] reported a series of one hundred four patients with extra-articular distal tibial fractures, out of which 56 patients had been managed by interlocking nails. Mean follow up time was 19.9 months. They reported a non-union in 4 patients (7.1%). All non-unions occurred after open fracture. In our study, we considered only closed fractures. Intramedullary nailing with early partial weight bearing resulted in union in more than 90% cases and one patient has delayed union.

Complications
Infection: One (5%) patients in our study developed infections. This patient had deep infection (proximal locking site) following closed fracture for which implant was removed and oral antibiotics were prescribed after the fracture had healed at 6 month follow up. As of now, this patient has no discharge from proximal interlocking site. Petrou et al. (2010) [10] conducted a study on 142 distal tibial fractures managed with reamed intramedullary nailing. They reported superficial infection in one case at the entry point of the nail. Thus, we can infer from our study that only one case has been found proximal interlocking site infection, closed intramedullary nailing have least chances of causing deep skin infection.

Metal works failure: Metal works failure was reported in two patients. The first patient had a prominent interlocking bolt from proximal interlocking site causing pain and second patient had concomitant intramedullary K-wire fixation of fibula causing pain. The symptomatic metal work was removed. No cases of breakage or proximal nail prominence have been observed in our study. Vallier et al., (2008) [11] evaluated 111 patients with 113 extra-articular distal tibia fractures between 4 and 11 cm proximal to the plafond. 76 were treated with an intramedullary nail. Two patients had prominent interlocking bolt removal done for pain relief.

Malunion: Achieving and maintaining a good reduction is the most difficult aspect of nailing in distal tibial fractures. In mid-diaphyseal fractures, insertion of the intramedullary nail aids fracture reduction as the nail has a diameter only slightly smaller than the cavity in which it sits, ensuring coronal and sagittal alignment. However, in distal tibia fractures, the flare of the metaphysis, allows a "windscreen wiper" action of the distal fragment and prevents interference fit of the nail in the bone, making reduction difficult. Other factors contributing to malunion are small distal segment and technical errors occurring during surgery. Our criteria for malunion were radiographic alignment of more than 5° in any plane. In our case series, malunion was observed in two patients (10%). Both patients had questionable compliance as they started weight bearing against advice. In our study, all the malunion were valgus. Both patients having malunion eventually developed ankle pain.

Zelle et al., (2006) [12] reviewed 1125 fractures of distal without articular involvement. Out of these, 489 patients were managed with intramedullary nailing. The authors reported a malunion rate of 16.2% in patients undergoing nailing.

Associated/Secondary procedures
In our study, none of the patients underwent associated procedures during the primary management of the fracture of the tibia. Further secondary procedure was performed in one patient in an attempt to achieve fracture union or manage complications.

In two patients, concomitant stabilization of fracture ipsilateral fibula was done with plates and screws and in one with intramedullary K-wire.

Two patients got painful hardware (intramedullary wire and proximal locking bolt) removed.

In one patient, the nail was removed in view of infection at proximal interlocking site. In one patient, dynamization was done 3 months post operation.

Vallier et al., (2011) [10] reported 14 secondary procedures in 10 patients managed with IM nails. Five of their patients underwent interlocking bolt removal, one patient underwent bone grafting for tibial defect, one patient underwent dynamization and fibula osteotomy, two patients underwent exchange nailing and one patient underwent exchange plating and bone grafting for non-unions.

Restricted ankle/knee range of motion
2 patients in our study had decreased range of motion (plantarflexion and dorsiflexion) at ankle. One of these patients has decreased ROM at ankle by approximately 5° in any plane. Both patients had questionable compliance as they started weight bearing against advice. In our study, all the malunion were valgus. Both patients having malunion eventually developed ankle pain.

Para schou et al., (2009) [8] reported a limitation of ankle movements in a range of 5 to 10 degrees in 5 patients and no restriction in knee motion in their study consisting of 45 extra-articular distal tibial fractures and non-unions.

Ankle pain and knee pain
Out of 20 patients in our case series, seven patients complained of ankle pain and two patient complained of knee pain. Out of 7 patients, 2 patients had malunion at fracture site. Intensity of both ankle and knee pain is mild to moderate and not limiting activity in most. However, one of the patient had persistent ankle pain and has angular malunion of more than 10 degrees.

3 out of these 7 patients are being prescribed NSAIDS regularly in view of pain. Most patients complained of pain on prolonged standing and associated ankle pain with prominent distal interlocking screws.

Causes of knee pain can be multifactorial. It can be caused by nail prominence, decreased quadriceps strength and injury to...
patellar tendon while carrying out the surgery. Paraschou et al., (2009) evaluated the results of interlocking intramedullary nailing in the treatment of extra-articular distal tibial fractures and non-unions. The authors reported knee pain in four patients due to the protrusion of the nail and it disappeared after removal of the nail.

**Conclusion**

Finally, this can be concluded from the Study that closed fractures of distal one-third tibia with or without associated fractures of fibula managed with closed intramedullary nailing had least number of complications, allows early partial weight bearing and 95% of the patients achieved union at the end of 6 months.

**References**