Clinical, diagnostic, and treatment features of Body Packing in Brazil: drugs, cell phones and beyond

Vinícius Henrique Almeida Guimarães

Federal University of Mineiro Triangle: Universidade Federal do Triangulo Mineiro

Carolina Cassiano

Federal University of Mineiro Triangle: Universidade Federal do Triangulo Mineiro

Dylmadson Iago Brito de Queiroz

Federal University of Mineiro Triangle: Universidade Federal do Triangulo Mineiro

Christian Tales Elias

Federal University of Mineiro Triangle: Universidade Federal do Triangulo Mineiro

Roberto da Mata Lenza

Federal University of Mineiro Triangle: Universidade Federal do Triangulo Mineiro

Ricardo Pastore

Federal University of Mineiro Triangle: Universidade Federal do Triangulo Mineiro

Carlo José Freire Oliveira (✉ carlo.oliveira@uftm.edu.br)

Universidade Federal do Triangulo Mineiro <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2211-7333>

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Abstract

Background: Body packing is the smuggling of drugs and other contents inside the human body and may represent a serious health risk. Despite studies from several countries, the clinical and surgical aspects of this emergency in Brazil have not been well-explored, especially when considering non-narcotic contents. Thus, the main objective of this study was to investigate cases of body packers treated by the surgical emergency service of a tertiary hospital in a central region of Brazil. We sought to highlight this medical emergency by considering both narcotic and non-narcotic contents smuggled by body packers.

Methods: This retrospective study analyzed the medical records of body packers admitted from January 2015 to December 2019 at one of the main tertiary hospitals in central Brazil. Ten cases of body packing were observed.

Results: Only 50% of the patients carried drugs, while surprisingly, 70% carried non-content, such as cell phones (40%), cell phone chargers (40%), Durepox adhesives (10%), small saws (10%), and pen-drives (10%). All the patients were male, inmates, and young adults, and body packing was carried out by oral ingestion. In 20% of the cases, there were no important clinical manifestations; in 60% of the cases, there were signs and symptoms of gastrointestinal obstruction; and in 30%, there was acute narcotic intoxication. Abdominal radiography was used for diagnosis in 80% of the cases, and endoscopy and tomography were used for the remaining 20%. In 90% of the cases, emergency laparotomy with gastrostomy was required. All the patients successfully recovered.

Conclusions: There was a higher prevalence of body packing of non-narcotic content; however, clinical and radiological presentations were similar to those of narcotic content, except for the presentation of acute narcotic intoxication. Emergency surgery was the most utilized intervention for the body packers and proved to be effective for both content types. This study highlights the concerning high prevalence of body packing of cell phones and accessories in addition to drugs; therefore, health professionals, surgeons, and security agents must be aware of the involvement of body packing in the trafficking of non-narcotic contents in Brazil.

Full Text

Due to technical limitations, full-text HTML conversion of this manuscript could not be completed. However, the manuscript can be downloaded and accessed as a PDF.

Figures

1A

1B

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1C

Figure 1

Radiographs showing the cellphones in the patients' gastrointestinal tracts as obtained in the abdominal radiograph. In all these patients (1A, 1B, and 1C), the cellphones were found in different locations; however, the cellphones were clearly visible in all the patients.

2A

2B

2C

2D

Figure 2

Intraoperative aspects of the cellphone extraction process from the gastrointestinal tract. A small cellphone was removed from the stomach by laparotomy access (2A). The cellphone was also wrapped (2B). The outer covering was removed (2C), which exposed the small cellphone (2D).

Figure 3

Characteristics of the drug packages after their removal from the patients involved in body packing. The different appearances of the packages indicate the different locations in which they were found within the gastrointestinal tract: in the left, packages from stomach; in the middle, packages from small intestine; in the right, packages from large intestine.