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A Rare Case of Takotsubo Cardiomyopathy Triggered by Severe Emotional Stress

Amanda Shapero*

Department of Experimental Cardiology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Introduction

Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, also known as "stress-induced cardiomyopathy" or "broken heart syndrome," is a transient form of heart failure that is often triggered by acute emotional or physical stress. First described in Japan in the1990s, the condition is characterized by sudden-onset chest pain, electrocardiographic changes, and left ventricular dysfunction that mimics Acute Myocardial Infarction (AMI), but without evidence of coronary artery disease. The hallmark of Takotsubo cardiomyopathy is the distinctive "apical ballooning" of the left ventricle seen on imaging, which gives the heart the appearance of a traditional Japanese octopus trap, or takotsubo. Although Takotsubo cardiomyopathy is typically seen in postmenopausal women, cases have been reported in men and in younger individuals, though these remain rare. The condition is often precipitated by extreme emotional stress, such as the death of a loved one, financial distress, or a sudden personal trauma. However, the exact mechanisms by which emotional stress leads to this transient cardiac dysfunction remain unclear, though theories include catecholamine surge, microvascular dysfunction, and altered myocardial cellular signaling. This case report highlights an unusual instance of Takotsubo cardiomyopathy triggered by severe emotional stress, shedding light on the pathophysiology, diagnostic challenges, and management of this rare yet potentially serious condition. In particular, it underscores the importance of recognizing Takotsubo cardiomyopathy as a differential diagnosis in patients presenting with chest pain and elevated cardiac biomarkers, especially when conventional coronary artery disease is ruled out. Understanding the triggers and clinical course of Takotsubo cardiomyopathy is essential for clinicians to appropriately manage these patients and prevent unnecessary interventions [1].

Description

Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, also known as stress-induced cardiomyopathy or "broken heart syndrome," is a transient cardiac condition that mimics Acute Myocardial Infarction (AMI) in its clinical presentation but occurs without the typical findings of obstructive coronary artery disease. Characterized by a sudden onset of chest pain, electrocardiographic abnormalities, and an acute decline in left ventricular function, Takotsubo cardiomyopathy often presents as a diagnostic challenge, as it shares several features with more common conditions such as AMI. The most distinguishing feature of this condition, however, is the unique, reversible pattern of left ventricular dysfunction, typically observed on imaging, which shows apical ballooning of the heart giving it the appearance of a takotsubo, a traditional Japanese octopus trap from which the condition gets its name. The condition is often triggered by an acute emotional or physical stressor, such as the loss of a loved one, a sudden personal trauma, a severe argument, or even an unexpected surprise. These intense emotional responses are thought to lead to a sudden surge in catecholamines (such as adrenaline), which may overwhelm the heart's capacity to handle the increased stress, leading to myocardial stunning or injury. While Takotsubo cardiomyopathy was first described in Japan in the 1990s, it has since been recognized worldwide, though it remains a rare diagnosis. It predominantly affects postmenopausal women, who are believed to be more susceptible due to hormonal factors that might amplify the effects of emotional or physical stress on the cardiovascular system. However, the condition can also occur in men and younger individuals, though these cases are less common [2].

The pathophysiology of Takotsubo cardiomyopathy remains incompletely understood. Several theories have been proposed to explain the mechanisms by which severe stress induces myocardial dysfunction. A significant contributing factor may be the release of excessive catecholamines, which are thought to cause myocardial toxicity, stunning, or spasm of the coronary microvasculature. Another theory involves the idea of microvascular dysfunction, where the small blood vessels supplying the heart may become impaired or unable to effectively deliver blood, leading to regional myocardial ischemia despite the absence of significant coronary artery disease. Finally, alterations in myocardial cellular signaling, potentially due to stress hormones or inflammatory mediators, may contribute to the acute dysfunction seen in the condition. While the clinical signs of Takotsubo cardiomyopathy may initially suggest a heart attack especially in terms of chest pain, elevated cardiac biomarkers (such as troponin), and ECG abnormalities coronary angiography typically reveals no significant coronary artery blockage. This is one of the key distinguishing factors between Takotsubo cardiomyopathy and AMI, though in some cases, patients may undergo unnecessary invasive procedures if the diagnosis is not made promptly. On imaging, such as echocardiography or cardiac MRI, the left ventricle exhibits the characteristic "ballooning" or apical dyskinesis, with the apex of the heart being disproportionately affected while the base remains relatively intact. This finding is critical in diagnosing Takotsubo cardiomyopathy and differentiating it from other potential causes of acute chest pain. Despite the dramatic clinical presentation, Takotsubo cardiomyopathy is generally a reversible condition. Most patients recover cardiac function within a few weeks to months, although some individuals may experience persistent symptoms or long-term complications such as heart failure or arrhythmias. The prognosis is generally favorable in the majority of cases, especially if the diagnosis is made early and appropriate supportive care is provided. However, in rare cases, complications such as ventricular rupture, thromboembolism, or cardiogenic shock can occur, which may result in significant morbidity or even mortality [3].

Management of Takotsubo cardiomyopathy primarily focuses on supportive care, including the use of medications to manage symptoms of heart failure, such as beta-blockers, Angiotensin-Converting Enzyme inhibitors (ACE inhibitors), or diuretics. Anticoagulation may also be considered in certain cases to reduce the risk of thromboembolism, particularly if the patient has reduced left ventricular ejection fraction or if there is evidence of left ventricular thrombus. Unlike AMI, which often requires interventional procedures such as Percutaneous Coronary Intervention (PCI) or Coronary Artery Bypass Grafting (CABG), Takotsubo cardiomyopathy does not require such invasive treatments unless a complicating factor arises. In fact, unnecessary interventions, such as stent placement, may not only be ineffective but could also expose patients to unnecessary risks. Rehabilitation, including physical therapy and psychological support, plays a vital role in the recovery process, particularly for those who experience significant emotional stress as the trigger for the event. This case of Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, triggered by severe emotional stress, underscores the importance of recognizing this rare but significant condition in the differential diagnosis of patients presenting with chest pain

***Address for Correspondence:** Amanda Shapero, Department of Experimental Cardiology, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands, E-mail: shapero.amanda@amsterdam.edu*

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and suspected acute coronary syndrome. Given the rising awareness of the condition and the increasing recognition of its various triggers, clinicians must be vigilant in considering Takotsubo cardiomyopathy in patients with a history of significant emotional or physical stress. Early identification allows for appropriate management, preventing unnecessary invasive interventions and providing the patient with the best chance for a full recovery. Furthermore, it is important for clinicians to understand that the recovery process from Takotsubo cardiomyopathy can be variable, and while most individuals do recover completely, ongoing follow-up is necessary to monitor for any residual effects or potential long-term complications [4].

From a pathophysiological standpoint, TTC is thought to be triggered by a surge in catecholamines—specifically epinephrine and norepinephrine—that results from a severe stressor, such as the loss of a loved one, a traumatic event, or even an intense physical stressor like surgery. These catecholamines can cause transient coronary vasospasm, microvascular dysfunction, and direct toxicity to myocardial cells, leading to the characteristic dysfunction of the left ventricle. Interestingly, unlike in a typical myocardial infarction, coronary artery obstruction is not present in TTC. Instead, coronary angiography generally reveals no significant stenosis, further distinguishing it from other cardiac conditions like Acute Coronary Syndrome (ACS). The classic presentation of TTC involves chest pain, dyspnea, and Electrocardiographic (ECG) changes that may mimic an acute myocardial infarction, including ST-segment elevation. However, unlike in traditional heart attacks, there is no significant coronary artery disease to explain these findings. Cardiac biomarkers such as troponins are often elevated, which adds to the initial diagnostic confusion, but these markers usually normalize over time as the heart muscle recovers. On imaging, echocardiography and cardiac magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) typically show apical or midventricular ballooning of the left ventricle, with normal or mildly reduced systolic function in other areas of the heart. The dysfunction tends to be reversible, with most patients recovering normal cardiac function within weeks to months. The exact pathophysiology of TTC remains debated, but it is believed that excessive sympathetic stimulation plays a key role. The intense emotional or physical stress leads to a rapid release of catecholamines, which may exceed the heart's ability to metabolize these hormones, resulting in myocardial injury. The apical region of the left ventricle is particularly susceptible to this catecholamine surge, possibly due to its higher density of adrenergic receptors and its relative lack of coronary collateral circulation. Furthermore, genetic predispositions, such as variations in adrenergic receptor density or other neurohormonal factors, may influence susceptibility. Although most cases of TTC resolve with supportive care and the prognosis is generally favorable, complications such as arrhythmias, left ventricular thrombus, or heart failure may occur in a minority of patients. Long-term outcomes are typically excellent, with the majority of patients returning to normal cardiac function within 1–2 months, although recurrent episodes of TTC are possible in a small subset of individuals [5].

Conclusion

In conclusion, while Takotsubo cardiomyopathy remains a rare diagnosis, its dramatic presentation and potential for rapid recovery make it a key consideration in patients presenting with acute chest pain, particularly when there is a clear history of severe emotional stress. Understanding the condition's pathophysiology, clinical presentation, diagnostic workup, and management is critical for clinicians to provide the best care possible. As more cases are recognized and reported, our understanding of this intriguing condition will continue to evolve, allowing for more precise and effective management of affected patients.

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