The craniocervical junction; anatomy, variants, trauma and pathologies.

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Authors: A. Isaac¹, P. A. Tyler¹, L. F. Wilson²; ¹London/UK, ²Stanmore/UK
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**Purpose**

The Craniocervical junction (CCJ) is a collective term used to describe the articulation of the skull and the cervical spine. This includes the occipito-atlantal and atlanto-axial articulations.

Despite being commonly imaged, the intricacy of the anatomical structures in this region poses challenges to interpreting the imaging findings. Symptomatic cases often have neck pain. Myelopathy, syringomyelia, cerebellar symptoms, cranial nerve or spinal cord deficits and vertebrobasilar ischemia may result from CCJ pathology. Differentiating clinically significant pathologies from normal variants is crucial for guiding further medical and surgical management.

We describe the anatomy of this complex region(1), with demonstration of the imaging features of normal variants, common patterns of trauma as well as various pathology that could affect the CCJ.

**Methods and Materials**

We describe the anatomy of this region on cross-sectional imaging and review the plain radiographic, CT and MRI imaging for a large gamut of normal variants, anomalies and conditions affecting the CSJ with illustration of cases from our institution. This includes fusion & segmentation anomalies, Chiari malformations, syndromes including Klippel-Feil, accessory ossicles, trauma, arthropathy, infection, osteoporotic basilar invagination, benign tumours as well as primary and secondary malignant bone tumours.

Treatment includes medical management, rehabilitation, internal or external stabilisation or excision and reconstructive surgery.

This is an educational exhibit. No scientific data will be presented.

**Results**

**Introduction:**
The CCJ is an anatomical region that is formed by complex articulations involving the occipital condyles and the first two vertebra. These bony structures encase and therefore protect the occipital lobes of the brain, brain stem and the proximal segment of the cervical spinal cord and surrounding CSF spaces. Numerous ligaments stabilise this framework whilst maintaining flexibility of movements at the articulating joints.

**Anatomy:**

Synovial joints at the suboccipital and atlanto axial articulations. (Images 1-9 Plain radiographs and MRI with annotations as attached image).

Two main stabilising ligaments are:

- **The transverse ligament:**
  The largest, strongest, and thickest craniocervical ligament (mean height/thickness 6-7 mm) (3). The transverse ligament runs posterior to the odontoid process of C-2 and attaches to the lateral tubercles of the atlas bilaterally. Part of the the cruciform ligaments. The transverse ligament maintains stability at the CCJ by locking the odontoid process anteriorly against the posterior aspect of the anterior arch of C-1, and it divides the ring of the atlas into 2 compartments: the anterior compartment houses the odontoid process, and the posterior compartment contains primarily the spinal cord and spinal accessory nerves.

- **The alar ligament:**
  The alar ligament attaches the axis to the base of the skull, from the lateral aspects of the odontoid process, to the anterolateral part of the foramen magnum and/or on the medial aspect of the occipital condyles. (4, 5, 6).

Other ligaments and membranes exist which reinforce stabilisation whilst maintaining adequate flexibility for optimal mobilisation across the CCJ, including the anterior longitudinal ligament, the anterior atlanto-axial and atlanto-occipital ligaments, and the tectorial membrane.

Normal measurements have been standardised at the craniocervical junction and are crucial when evaluating the CCJ and assessing for upper cervical spine injury (7).

**Anatomic Location & Dimensions:**

Basion-dens interval <12 mm
Basion-posterior axial line interval <12 mm posterior to dens,<4 mm anterior to dens

Prevertebral soft tissues <6 mm at C2, flat or concave

Anterior atlanto-dens interval <2 mm

Lateral atlanto-dens interval <2-3 mm side-to-side difference

Atlanto-occipital articulation 1-2 mm

Atlantoaxial articulation 2-3 mm

A variety of lines and standardised measurements are applied to the CCJ to assess for normal alignment and detect disruption of these normal relations (1&8). Sagittal T2WI MRI study of the cervical spine is the recommended sequence to demonstrate the normal alignment and craniometry of the CCJ- (Images 4-9: small field of view to demonstrate the CCJ). The most widely used craniometric lines include (8):

A. Mc Rae’s line: From basion to opisthion. The tip of the odontoid process should always lie below this line in normal individuals.

B. Wackenheim's clivus baseline/basilar line: drawn parallel to the posterior clivus and extrapolated distally into the spinal canal, where it should touch the odontoid process.

C. The clivus-canal angle/craniovertebral angle: This is formed by the intersection of the basilar line with a line drawn along the posterior cortex of the axis and the odontoid process. The normal range is 150 degrees in flexion and 180 degrees in extension. Ventral spinal cord compression is likely to occur when the angle is less than 150 degrees.

D. The power ratio: the ratio of the distance from the basion to the posterior arch of atlas to the distance between the opisthion and the anterior arch of atlas. This should always be less than one in normal CCJs.

E. The basion-dens interval (<12mm).

F. The basion-posterior axial line interval: This varies from 4mm anterior to basion to 12mm posterior to basion.

G. The pre-dental space: In infants and young persons this measures 3-5mm, whilst in adolescents and adults this should measures <3mm. The posterior-dental space is
normally at least 15mm in children and 19mm in adults and should never be less than 13mm.

We now discuss various pathology of the CCJ with demonstration of cases imaged in our institution. These include:

-Congenital and normal variants:

• Normal Variants and unfused physis: Accessory ossicles eg Os odontoideum (image 10) and Ossiculum terminale (image 11&12).

• Congenital basilar invagination: associated with anomalies of the posterior cranial fossa and a short vertical clivus. The causes include basioccipital hypoplasia, occipital condyle hypoplasia, atlanto-occipital assimilation and various neural abnormalities including Chiari malformations (images 13-18), and may also occur as a result of the bone softening seen in osteogenesis imperfecta (image 19&20), mucopolysaccharidosis such as Morquios (image 21) and Hurlers' syndromes as well as metabolic conditions including rickets and hyperparathyroidism. In all cases the craniovertebral angle becomes abnormally acute (<90 degrees) with possible compression at the CCJ and syringomyelia.

• Atlantoaxial assimilation: Segmentation anomalies (image 22-24).

• Anomalies of the atlas ring: partial or complete aplasia or hypoplasia and fusion anomalies and rotatory subluxation (image 25-28).

• Odontoid process anomalies: such as aplasia/hypoplasia.

Other miscellaneous conditions associated with CCJ anomalies; including Down's syndrome, Achondroplasia, Retts (image 29-30) and Klippel Feil syndromes (image 31) as well as rare conditions such as spondyloepiphyseal dysplasia (image 32-35).

**CCJ abnormalities in Down's syndrome:** Various ligamentous and bony abnormalities may occur. These include atlanto-axial subluxation, odontoid hypoplasia, os odontoideum and rotatory atlanto-axial subluxation. Hypoplasia of the posterior arch of the atlas is reported in 26% of cases and may be a cause of CCJ spinal cord compression.
**CCJ abnormalities in Achondroplasia:** A congenital disorder which is the commonest form of short limb dwarfism. CCJ disorders include skull base stenosis, short vertical clivus, segmentation & fusion anomalies, odontoid hypoplasia, atlanto-axial instability, fibrous union of the posterior arch of atlas to the occiput and basilar invagination in more than 50% of cases.

**-Trauma:**

- Atlanto-occipital dissociation
- Ligamentous avulsion injuries (Image 36).
- Atlas fracture (Image 37-44).
- Atlantoaxial rotatory instability
- Odontoid peg fractures (Image 45-51).
- Fractures of the axis including Hangman's fractures (Image 52-58).

**-Infection: (Image 59-61):**

CCJ infection is relatively rare. Infection may be blood born, secondary to direct spread, post traumatic or iatrogenic (following surgery or percutaneous interventions). The commonest forms are pyogenic osteomyelitis or craniocervical TB.

- **Pyogenic osteomyelitis:** very rare at the CCJ. The most reported cases are staphylococcus aureus infection involving C2 vertebra (10). Rare cases of septic arthritis of the atlanto-axial joint have also been reported (11).

- **Grisel Syndrome:** A condition where inflammatory disorders of the upper neck may result in secondary transverse atlantal ligament insufficiency, possibly due to hyperaemia and decalcification of the anterior arch of the atlas. This condition- again uncommon- is seen in children who present with atlanto-axial instability following upper respiratory tract infection. This may rarely be seen in adults (12).

- **Craniocervical TB:** Cervical TB accounts for 10% of all cases of spinal TB, but is very rarely isolated to the CCJ (1% of cases). However it is a relatively common cause of CCJ instability and cervico-medullary compression in the developing world. Pathologically three stages of craniocervical TB have been described:- Stage 1: Intact ligaments, minimal bone destruction and no signs of instability- Stage 2: atlanto-axial subluxation with minimal
bone destruction-Stage 3: Advanced bone destruction and complete obliteration of the anterior arch of C1, often with associated occipitocervical instability.

- **Arthropathy: (Image 62-75):**

  The commonest types of arthropathy affecting the cervical spine and CCJ include:

  - Degenerative OA
  
  - Rheumatoid arthritis (CCJ and atlanto-axial involvement in 50% of RA patients)
  
  - Calcium pyrophosphate deposition arthropathy (CPPD)
  
  - Amyloid arthropathy (a recognised cause for pseudo-tumours of the CCJ in long term renal dialysis patients)

- **Tumours:**

  We present several benign, primary and secondary tumours affecting the CCJ. (Images 76-88).

**Images for this section:**
Fig. 1: Image 1: Lateral plain radiograph of the cervical spine demonstrating normal alignment. The red circle is referred to as the Harris' ring at the base of C2. A broken ring indicates a C2 fracture.
Fig. 2: Image 2: Lateral plain radiograph of the cervical spine demonstrating normal alignment. Three lines are used to assess for sagittal alignment of the CCJ, the anterior two lines correspond to the anterior and posterior longitudinal ligaments (Red and Blue). The third line assesses for the alignment of the posterior column structures, predominantly the spinous processes (yellow and green). Normally the tip of the C1 spinous process does not articulate with the occiput, with a gap seen on neutral, flexion and extension views (green line).
Fig. 3: Normal relationships within the craniocervical junction. Drawings illustrate the basion-dens interval (red), the posterior axial line, which is drawn along the posterior
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Fig. 10: Os odontoideum. A bony ossicle cephalad and separate from the axis body in the location of the odontoid process. Considered by some scholars to be traumativ in origin through developmental/embryonic fracture of the dens causing an apical fragment to be pulled proximally by the alar ligament whilst the caudal portion resorbs, leading to the appearance of ossicle. Associated with ligamentous abnormalities and instability of atlanto-axial joint and cervical cord injury as well as rounding and hypertrophy of the anterior arch of the atlas and hypoplasia of the remaining dens with a wide separating gap.

Fig. 19: Osteogenesis imperfecta causing bone softening and secondary cranial settling, with reduced AP dimensions of the foramen magnum and proximal spinal...
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Fig. 16: Image 15-17: Chiari malformation type 2 and an intramedullary syrinx.
Fig. 15: Image 15-17: Chiari malformation type 2 and an intramedullary syrinx.
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**Fig. 13:** Image 13 & 14: Chiari 1 malformation in a scoliosis patient. Sagittal T2 weighted scan of the cervical spine, demonstrating low lying cerebellar tonsils displaced into the upper cervical canal through the foramen magnum (arrow)

![Image](image13_14.png)

**Fig. 12:** Image 11 & 12: Ossiculum terminale: 2y oss centre at tip of peg. Appears at 3 years and fuses at 12. Present in 26% of normals aged 5-11 years of age.
**Fig. 11:** Image 11 & 12: Ossiculum terminale: 2y oss centre at tip of peg. Appears at 3 years and fuses at 12. Present in 26% of normals aged 5-11 years of age.
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![CT Image](image)

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Conclusion

Understanding the CJS appearances on imaging is crucial in accurate diagnosis and management of patients.

Misdiagnosis can lead to serious complications and potentially life threatening outcomes.

This review on high quality multimodality imaging of the CCJ, of a wide range of cases with detailed description of findings and differential diagnosis, should increase the reader's awareness of potential findings at the CCJ and boost their confidence in identifying and precisely diagnosing abnormal imaging appearances.

References


Personal Information

Authors: A. Isaac1, P. A. Tyler1, P. Kesara1, L. F. Wilson2;

1 The Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital, London/UK, 2 Stanmore/UK

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