Research

Intramuscular gluteal injections in the increasingly obese population: retrospective study
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Abstract

Aims To examine depth of subcutaneous fat at gluteal intramuscular injection sites.
Design Retrospective study.
Setting General hospital.
Participants 100 consecutive adults who had computed tomography of the pelvis.
Main outcome measures Minimum distance between the surface of the skin and the nearest edge of muscle at intramuscular injection sites.
Results 12 patients had a ventrogluteal site depth of more than 35 mm, the maximum depth of a green needle, and 26 had a ventrogluteal depth of more than 25 mm, the maximum depth of a blue needle. 43 patients had a dorsogluteal site depth of more than 35 mm, and 72 had a dorsogluteal depth of more than 25 mm. The intramuscular site was likely to be deeper in women.
Conclusion Standard green and blue needles do not reach the gluteal muscles in a considerable number of patients.

Introduction

Studies of intramuscular injections have shown differences in peak plasma concentrations of narcotics and in perceived pain relief, depending on gluteal or deltoid injection site. Response levels to vaccination vary according to intramuscular injection site. Different responses depending on site have also been noticed for injections of antibiotics, insulin, and lignocaine. Possible reasons for this variation in efficacy include different ratios of adipose to lean muscle tissue, greater blood flow in deltoid than gluteal muscle, and positional external compression of the gluteus. In a population that is increasingly overweight, these factors could become more exaggerated, leading overall to less effective intramuscular gluteal injections. Additionally, if the depth of fat is so great that the needle cannot reach the muscular layer in many patients, the average absorption of the drug in the population will be lower.

Method

Scans from 100 consecutive adults (39 men, 61 women; mean 47.8 (SD 11.3) years; range 22-65 years) who had computed tomography scans of the pelvis were included in the study. I used automated computed tomography callipers to determine the minimum distance between the surface of the skin and the nearest edge of muscle at the ventrogluteal and dorsogluteal injection sites. (To determine the ventrogluteal site, place the ball of the opposing hand on the greater trochanter and index finger on the anterior superior iliac crest; form a V with the middle finger; the injection site is within the V.) The dorsogluteal site is the upper outer quadrant of the buttock. I also correlated the depth at both sites with age and sex of the patients.

Discussion

Due to the depth of fat, intramuscular injections with large (green) needles into the anterior gluteal site in this sample would be subcutaneous in 12% of patients (16% of women and 5% of men), and for injections with smaller (blue) needles in 26% (36% of women and 10% of men). In the posterior gluteal site, large needles will fail to reach muscle in 43% (57% of women and 21% of men), and small needles will fail in 72% (90% of women and 44% of men). The number of patients used in this study was small, and they were recruited only from a local population and did not include the extremes of age. Although the depth of their gluteal intramuscular injection sites may vary from the national average, this study shows that in a significant minority of patients the standard green or blue needles, which are the normal method of delivery, will fail to reach muscle. In highly obese populations, the depth could be expected to be even greater than that shown here.

As previous studies have shown low efficacy of gluteal intramuscular injections, this route should be avoided for most drugs.
If alternative routes are not possible, using longer needles should be considered.

Contributors: ACN is the sole contributor and is guarantor.
Funding: None.
Competing interests: None declared.
Ethical approval: Not required.

What is already known on this topic

The gluteal site can be less effective for intramuscular injections than other sites, such as deltoid

What this study adds

The gluteal muscles are beyond the reach of standard green and blue needles in a significant minority of patients


(Accepted 21 November 2005)
doi 10.1136/bmj.38706.742731.47

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