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Perspective

A Silent Postoperative Saboteur: Paecilomyces Keratitis Leading to Corneal Melt After CCCS

David Garcia*

Department of Gavin Herbert Eye Institute, University of California, Irvine School of Medicine, 850 Health Sciences Rd, Irvine, CA, USA

DESCRIPTION

Postoperative infections following ocular surgery remain among the most feared complications in ophthalmology, particularly because of their potential to compromise vision, disrupt healing, and challenge clinical management. While bacterial pathogens dominate the etiological landscape of postoperative keratitis, fungal infections though notably rare pose a uniquely complex threat. Among the diverse fungal species implicated in corneal infections, *Paecilomyces* stands apart as an uncommon but formidable adversary. Its subtle onset, intrinsic resistance to several therapeutic agents, ability to invade deeper corneal layers, and tendency to be misdiagnosed make it a silent yet potent postoperative saboteur.

Clear Corneal Cataract Surgery (CCCS) has revolutionized ophthalmic practice through its minimally invasive approach, rapid recovery, and reduced risk of postoperative inflammation. However, the very nature of clear corneal incisions, while beneficial, creates a temporary structural vulnerability. In rare circumstances, this vulnerability may allow pathogens like paecilomyces to infiltrate the cornea. When infection occurs, the consequences can escalate dramatically especially if the pathogen triggers corneal melt, a destructive process characterized by stromal degradation and thinning that can lead to perforation and significant visual morbidity.

This commentary examines *paecilomyces keratitis* as a stealthy postoperative pathogen and highlights the importance of early recognition, diagnostic precision, and aggressive management. Through a detailed exploration of its pathogenesis, clinical presentation, diagnostic challenges, and therapeutic complexities, this article underscores why paecilomyces infection deserves heightened awareness in the postoperative setting. Paecilomyces species, notably paecilomyces lilacinus and paecilomyces variotii, are saprophytic fungi typically found in soil, decaying vegetation, and moist environmental niches. Although they rarely cause ocular disease, their opportunistic nature becomes clinically relevant in eyes with compromised protective barriers. Unlike more common fungal pathogens such as aspergillus or fusarium, paecilomyces demonstrates an unusual resistance profile. Many conventional antifungal medications, including natamycin and amphotericin b, are either ineffective or exhibit limited activity against this organism.

This resistance profile significantly complicates clinical management and increases the likelihood of progressive infection. Additionally, *paecilomyces* grows slowly compared to other filamentous fungi and may demonstrate variable morphology on culture. This combination rarity, resistance, and slow proliferation makes it particularly adept at evading early recognition in postoperative patients. As a result, clinicians may attribute the early clinical signs to sterile inflammation, incision-related edema, or delayed wound healing, unknowingly allowing the infection to progress. Clear corneal cataract surgery has become the global standard for cataract extraction, prized for its sutureless incisions, lower risk of postoperative astigmatism, and rapid visual recovery. However, in the early postoperative period, the structural integrity of the cornea remains compromised. Micro-gaps or wound leaks, even microscopic ones, may provide a pathway for microbial contamination. Environmental fungi like paecilomyces can access deeper stromal layers through these transient breaches, especially if the patient is exposed to contaminated water, dust, or agricultural environments.

Additionally, the healing process following cccs alters corneal sensation and local immunity. The temporary desensitization of nerves reduces reflexive protection mechanisms, and the widespread use of topical steroids suppresses inflammation that might otherwise signal the presence of an early infection. Together, these factors create an ideal environment for paecilomyces to quietly anchor itself within the corneal stroma and proliferate, often undetected until tissue damage becomes clinically significant. One of the greatest challenges in diagnosing *paecilomyces keratitis* lies in its deceptively subtle early presentation. Rather than producing an intense inflammatory response typical in bacterial infections paecilomyces often induces minimal redness, mild discomfort, and vague visual disturbances. Patients may report only foreign-

Correspondence to: David Garcia, Department of Gavin Herbert Eye Institute, University of California, Irvine School of Medicine, 850 Health Sciences Rd, Irvine, CA, USA, E-mail: davidgarcia@sp.cm

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body sensation or mild irritation, symptoms that closely resemble routine postoperative recovery.

Clinically, paecilomyces may form small, deep stromal infiltrates with indistinct borders, often lacking the classic feathery edges characteristic of other fungal keratitides. This atypical morphology further complicates early recognition. Depending on the lesion's location relative to the surgical wound, the infiltrate may be mistaken for sterile wound melt, incision edema, or a delayed immune reaction. The slow pace of progression also allows clinicians to misattribute symptoms to other causes, delaying aggressive intervention at a critical time. Furthermore, early laboratory investigations may fail to isolate the pathogen. Standard stains, smears, and cultures may initially be negative due to the slow growth and low organism load. As a result, empirical antibiotic therapy is often initiated based on a presumed bacterial etiology, inadvertently allowing the fungus to proliferate deeper into the stroma.

Corneal melting refers to the progressive degradation and thinning of the corneal stroma, ultimately threatening corneal integrity. In the context of paecilomyces keratitis, corneal melt arises from a destructive interplay between fungal enzymes, inflammatory mediators, and host immune responses. Paecilomyces secretes enzymes such as proteases and collagenases which break down the stromal collagen matrix. As the organism invades, it penetrates deep stromal layers, creating structural instability. Simultaneously, the host response contributes to the problem: neutrophils and other inflammatory cells migrate to the site of infection and release their own matrix-degrading enzymes. This double enzymatic attack overwhelms the cornea's ability to heal, leading to liquefaction and thinning.

The process often begins subtly, with localized stromal haze or thinning, but can progress rapidly once enzymatic degradation accelerates. Descemet's membrane may become exposed or bulge outward, and in severe cases, full-thickness perforation occurs. When corneal melt is triggered by paecilomyces, the risk of perforation is significantly elevated due to the organism's ability to penetrate deeply and resist early medical therapy. Early diagnosis is critical in fungal keratitis, yet *paecilomyces* poses multiple diagnostic challenges. Its slow growth means that cultures may take several days to weeks to yield identifiable colonies. In many cases, the initial smears may show no fungal elements, leading clinicians to continue pursuing antibacterial strategies. Advanced diagnostic tools such as in vivo confocal microscopy can offer early insights by identifying filamentous structures within the stroma. Pcr-based methods may also improve sensitivity and speed of identification. However, these tools are not universally available, particularly in low-resource settings, creating inequities in diagnostic capability. Even when the organism is identified, susceptibility testing is crucial because paecilomyces may resist many commonly used antifungal agents. The combination of delayed recognition, diagnostic uncertainty, and therapeutic resistance contributes to the escalation of corneal damage and increases the risk of corneal melt.

Treatment of *Paecilomyces keratitis* is notoriously difficult due to its resistance profile. Natamycin, the first-line therapy for filamentous fungal keratitis, is often ineffective. Amphotericin b, another commonly used antifungal, similarly shows poor activity against most paecilomyces strains. This leaves voriconazole as the most effective primary therapy for such infections. Voriconazole's excellent penetration into deeper corneal layers makes it well-suited for invasive fungal infections. However, the timing of therapy initiation is critical. If voriconazole is introduced only after corneal melt has begun, medical therapy alone may not be enough to stabilize the tissue. In such cases, adjunctive procedures including repeated debridement, amniotic membrane transplantation, and collagen cross-linking may be necessary to control the infection and slow tissue destruction.

In advanced stages, therapeutic Penetrating Keratoplasty (PK) may become the only viable intervention. Unfortunately, even pk carries the risk of postoperative recurrence if fungal elements extend beyond the excised tissue. The combination of aggressive disease, limited therapeutic tools, and surgical complexity underscores the profound clinical challenge posed by paecilomyces keratitis. The rarity of postoperative fungal keratitis can lead to complacency, but awareness is essential. Strict adherence to aseptic protocol during cccs, proper handling and storage of medications, and patient education about environmental exposure after surgery are foundational preventive measures. Clinicians should adopt a high index of suspicion for fungal pathogens in any postoperative eye that fails to respond to standard antibacterial therapy. Early diagnostic evaluation including repeated cultures and advanced fungal imaging when available can significantly improve outcomes. Additionally, minimizing unnecessary steroid use and monitoring wound integrity during early follow-up visits can reduce opportunities for opportunistic fungi to take hold.

CONCLUSION

Paecilomyces keratitis represents a rare yet profoundly consequential postoperative complication, especially when arising after clear corneal cataract surgery. Its ability to invade subtly, mimic benign postoperative findings, resist first-line antifungals, and trigger corneal melt makes it a silent but dangerous saboteur in the postoperative period. The progression from mild irritation to stromal liquefaction and potential perforation highlights the organism's destructive capacity and the urgency of early, precise intervention.

A high index of suspicion, combined with timely diagnostic testing and prompt initiation of appropriate antifungal therapy particularly voriconazole is crucial for preventing permanent corneal damage. Ultimately, heightened awareness and proactive management can significantly reduce the morbidity associated with this elusive pathogen. As surgical techniques continue to advance, maintaining vigilance for uncommon postoperative infections like paecilomyces ensures that the benefits of modern ophthalmology are not undermined by preventable complications.