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# A Review of Complications in Hostile Abdomen

**Ángeles Yasunari Cortés García[1], Fernando Sánchez Martínez[2], Carlos Ronaldo Martínez Mateo[3], Oscar Sebastian Salinas Rosas[4], José Luis Ortiz Fernández[5], Alan Eduardo Soto Castro[6], Ulises Álvarez Ocegueda[7], María José Ocejo Méndez[8], Manuel Alejandro Aguilar Sabori[9], y Luis Felipe Ramos Flores[10]**

[1]Hospital Regional ISSSTE Morelia

[2]ISSSTE Clínica Hospital Constitución ORCID: 0009-0004-5462-9143

[3]Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México ORCID: 0009-0005-0683-262X

[4]Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos ORCID: 0000-0003-3227-8915

[5]Hospital General de Gómez Palacio

[6]Hospital Regional ISSSTE Veracruz

[7]Hospital General Zona No 1 AguascalientesORCID: 0009-0008-4027-8310

[8]Hospital General Eduardo Vaszquez N ORCID: 0000-0002-0872-173X

[9]Universidad Autónoma de Baja California

[10]Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla

**ABSTRACT**

A "hostile abdomen" refers to a challenging surgical scenario characterized by dense adhesions, scarring, and anatomical distortions resulting from previous surgeries, trauma, or pathological conditions. These factors significantly complicate reoperative procedures, increasing the risk of complications such as enterocutaneous and enteroatmospheric fistulas, small bowel obstruction, anastomotic leaks, and intra-abdominal infections. The etiology of a hostile abdomen commonly includes prior abdominal surgeries, damage control laparotomy, inflammatory diseases, and intra-abdominal infections, all of which contribute to the formation of extensive adhesions and fibrotic changes.

Managing a hostile abdomen requires a multidisciplinary approach, involving meticulous surgical planning and the use of advanced techniques such as biologic mesh for abdominal wall reconstruction. Surgeons must remain vigilant for complications, including sepsis, incisional hernias, and malignant bowel obstruction, which can significantly impact patient outcomes. Early identification and appropriate intervention are critical to reducing morbidity and improving postoperative recovery. As surgical advancements continue, further research is necessary to refine strategies for minimizing complications and optimizing the management of patients with a hostile abdomen.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a medical context, the term "hostile abdomen" refers to a clinical scenario where the abdominal cavity has undergone significant changes due to previous surgeries, trauma, or pathological conditions, making subsequent surgical interventions challenging. This condition is often characterized by dense adhesions, scarring, and anatomical distortions that complicate reoperative procedures. The presence of a hostile abdomen can increase the risk of complications such as enterocutaneous fistulas (ECFs) and enteroatmospheric fistulas (EAFs), particularly in patients who have undergone open-abdomen management for severe trauma or abdominal catastrophes.

The management of a hostile abdomen requires careful surgical planning and may involve the use of advanced techniques and materials, such as biologic mesh, to address large abdominal wall defects and facilitate hernia repair. The complexity of these cases underscores the importance of a multidisciplinary approach and the need for experienced surgical teams to optimize patient outcomes.

Causes

A "hostile abdomen" is a term used to describe an abdominal cavity that has undergone significant changes due to previous surgeries, trauma, or pathological conditions, leading to dense adhesions and complications such as enterocutaneous fistulas. The common causes of a hostile abdomen include:

1. **Previous Abdominal Surgeries**: Surgical interventions, particularly those involving the peritoneum, are a primary cause of adhesion formation. Adhesions are fibrous bands that form between tissues and organs, often as a result of the body's healing process after surgery. These adhesions can lead to complications such as small bowel obstruction and difficulties during reoperation.
2. **Trauma and Damage Control Surgery**: Trauma requiring damage control laparotomy can result in a hostile abdomen. The open abdomen technique, often used in severe trauma cases, can lead to complications such as enterocutaneous fistulas and dense adhesions due to the prolonged exposure of the peritoneal cavity and repeated surgical interventions.
3. **Inflammatory Conditions**: Conditions such as appendicitis or peritonitis can lead to peritoneal inflammation, which promotes adhesion formation. The inflammatory response can disrupt normal peritoneal fibrinolysis, leading to excessive fibrous tissue deposition and adhesion formation.
4. **Intra-abdominal Infections and Sepsis**: Infections within the abdominal cavity, such as those associated with anastomotic leaks or fistulas, can exacerbate adhesion formation due to the inflammatory response and subsequent fibrotic changes.
5. **Pathological Conditions**: Conditions like inflammatory bowel disease or endometriosis can also contribute to the development of a hostile abdomen due to chronic inflammation and repeated surgical interventions.

These factors collectively contribute to the complexity and challenges associated with managing a hostile abdomen, often necessitating specialized surgical approaches and careful preoperative planning to mitigate risks and complications.

The Björck classification

The Björck classification is a system used to categorize the clinical status of patients with an open abdomen (OA), which can arise from complications such as those seen in a hostile abdomen due to previous surgeries, trauma, or inflammatory conditions. This classification is designed to standardize the description of the patient's clinical course, improve management strategies, and facilitate communication among healthcare providers.

The classification includes several grades:

- Grade 1A: Clean OA without adherence between the bowel and abdominal wall or fixity of the abdominal wall.
- Grade 1B: Contaminated OA without adherence/fixity.
- Grade 2A: Clean OA developing adherence/fixity.
- Grade 2B: Contaminated OA developing adherence/fixity.
- Grade 3: OA complicated by fistula formation.
- Grade 4: Frozen OA with adherent/fixed bowel, unable to close surgically, with or without fistula.

In the context of a hostile abdomen, the Björck classification is particularly relevant for monitoring complications such as enterocutaneous fistulas, which are explicitly addressed in Grade 3 and potentially in Grade 4. The presence of fistulas significantly complicates the clinical management of these patients, as it can lead to further morbidity and challenges in achieving abdominal closure. The classification aids in identifying the severity and complexity of the OA, thereby guiding therapeutic decisions and prognostication.

Complications

In patients with a hostile abdomen, several additional complications should be monitored beyond enterocutaneous fistulas and small bowel obstruction. These include:

**Intra-abdominal Sepsis and Abscess Formation**: Patients with a hostile abdomen, particularly those who have undergone damage control laparotomy, are at increased risk for intra-abdominal sepsis and abscesses. This is often due to the presence of enteric fistulas and the complex nature of the abdominal environment post-surgery.

**Incisional Hernias**: Following trauma laparotomy, there is a significant incidence of incisional hernias, which can complicate the clinical course and require further surgical intervention.

3. **Anastomotic Leaks**: In patients who have undergone bowel resections or anastomoses, there is a risk of anastomotic leaks, which can lead to peritonitis and further complicate the abdominal environment.

4. **Adhesive Small Bowel Obstruction (SBO)**: Adhesions from previous surgeries or inflammatory conditions can lead to SBO, which is a common complication in patients with a history of abdominal surgery.

5. **Malignant Bowel Obstruction (MBO)**: In patients with a history of cancer or cytoreductive surgery, malignant obstructions can occur, complicating the management of bowel obstructions.

Monitoring for these complications involves a combination of clinical vigilance, imaging studies, and sometimes exploratory surgery, depending on the patient's presentation and the severity of symptoms. Early identification and management of these complications are crucial to improving outcomes in patients with a hostile abdomen.

## CONCLUSION

The management of a hostile abdomen remains a significant surgical challenge due to the presence of dense adhesions, anatomical distortions, and an increased risk of complications such as enterocutaneous fistulas, anastomotic leaks, and small bowel obstruction. The underlying causes, including prior surgeries, trauma, and inflammatory conditions, contribute to the complexity of reoperative procedures and necessitate a meticulous surgical approach.

Successful management requires a multidisciplinary strategy, incorporating advanced surgical techniques, appropriate use of biologic materials, and careful preoperative planning to minimize complications and optimize patient outcomes. Early recognition and proactive management of complications such as intra-abdominal sepsis, incisional hernias, and bowel obstructions are crucial in improving long-term prognoses. As surgical techniques and perioperative care continue to evolve, further research and clinical advancements will be essential in enhancing the safety and effectiveness of interventions in patients with a hostile abdomen.

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