

Mold Infections in Solid Organ Transplant Recipients



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KEYWORDS

- Antifungal • Aspergillosis • Invasive fungal infections • Fusariosis • Mucormycosis
- Transplant

KEY POINTS

- Mold infections in solid organ transplant (SOT) recipients are a significant cause of morbidity with a high 12-week mortality of 29%.
- The most common and serious mold infections in SOT recipients include invasive aspergillosis, mucormycosis, fusariosis, scedosporiosis, and phaeohyphomycosis.
- Diagnosis of mold infections can be challenging and usually requires histopathologic and/or microbiologic criteria, often obtained by biopsy and culture of affected tissues. Blood cultures are positive in about half of the patients with disseminated *Fusarium* species or *Lomentospora prolificans* infections.
- Treatment of mold infections often necessitates combined antifungal therapy and surgical excision or debridement for localized disease.

INTRODUCTION

Mold infections are an important cause of morbidity and mortality in the solid organ transplant (SOT) population. These infections carry a significant clinical and economic burden.^{1–3} Mold infections include invasive aspergillosis (IA) and other emerging fungal pathogens, such as mucormycosis (zygomycosis), *Fusarium*, *Scedosporium*, and the dematiaceous fungi (dark molds), among others. Diagnosis and management of these patients are challenging, often requiring invasive diagnostic methodologies and a multidisciplinary approach to treatment. IA is the most common mold infection and second most common invasive fungal infection (IFI) (after *Candida*) in SOT recipients, accounting for 19% to 25% of all IFIs, with non-*Aspergillus* molds making up 7% to 10%.^{4–7} Risk factors for infection include immunosuppressive therapy, loss of skin or mucosal integrity, and risks specific to organ transplant type, such as chronic lung disease or anatomic disruptions.^{6,8} The 12-week overall mortality of mold infections in SOT recipients is overall high at 29% but varies by organ transplant type, with the

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Infect Dis Clin N Am 32 (2018) 687–701

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.idc.2018.04.006>

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highest mortality in liver transplant recipients.^{5,9} This article reviews the epidemiology, risk factors, microbiology, diagnostic, and treatment approach to mold infections in SOT recipients.

ASPERGILLOSIS

IA is generally acquired via inhalation of conidia, making pulmonary infection the most common site of infection. Infections may be localized (pulmonary or extrapulmonary including surgical wound infections) or disseminated. Lung transplant recipients can be at risk for tracheobronchitis or infection of the bronchial anastomosis. IA occurs in 1% to 15% of SOT recipients.¹⁰ Mortality in a recent series of SOT recipients was reported at 22%, which appears improved from historical cohorts, wherein mortality has been as high as 92% in some SOT populations.^{11–13} The most common species causing human disease is *Aspergillus fumigatus*; *Aspergillus flavus*, *Aspergillus niger*, and *Aspergillus terreus* are also frequently encountered.

Diagnosis of IA, like other IFI, requires microbiologic and/or histopathologic criteria to define proven infection by European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer/Mycoses Study Group revised definitions.¹⁴ Acquisition of adequate specimens is crucial for early diagnosis; bronchoscopy with bronchoalveolar lavage (BAL) is recommended for patients with suspected invasive pulmonary aspergillosis (IPA) with consideration of transbronchial biopsy or percutaneous needle biopsy depending on radiographic site of lesion.¹⁵ Staining shows narrow septate hyphae with acute angle branching (Fig. 1). Recommended radiographic imaging should include chest computerized tomography (CT) scan for suspected IPA. Typical CT findings include nodules, consolidative lesions, or wedge-shaped infarcts. The classic halo sign, a nodule surrounded by a perimeter of ground glass opacity reflecting hemorrhage, may be seen particularly in neutropenic patients. An air crescent, or cavity in a mass or nodule, is usually a late CT finding.¹⁵ Biomarkers such galactomannan (GM) and (1-3)- β -D-glucan from the serum may be considered but have low sensitivity in SOT recipients. Serum GM sensitivity has been reported to be only 20% to 30% in SOT populations.^{16,17} However, testing of BAL for GM may improve sensitivity to 67% to 100% in SOT recipients.¹⁰ Molecular testing with *Aspergillus* polymerase chain reaction (PCR) shows promise with high sensitivity for diagnosis of IA in some studies,

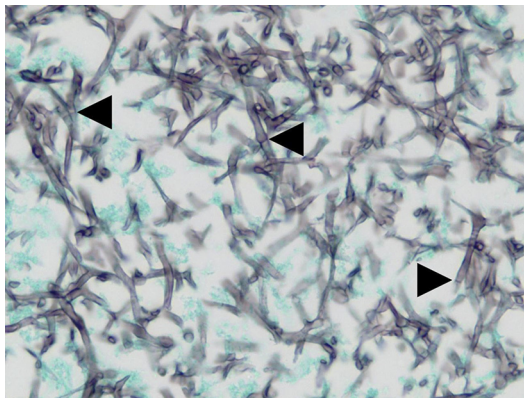


Fig. 1. *Aspergillus* narrow septate hyphae (arrowheads) (GMS stain, oil magnification $\times 1000$). (Courtesy of Dr Daniel Rhoads and Dr Wissam Dahoud, UH Cleveland Medical Center, Cleveland, OH; with permission.)

but its exact role in diagnosis and management of SOT recipients (and other patient populations) is still not established.^{15,18} Blood cultures with *Aspergillus* species usually are consistent with contamination and are rarely associated with IA even in high-risk patients.¹⁹

Early initiation of antifungal treatment of strongly suspected IA is recommended while conducting diagnostic testing to limit progression of disease.¹⁵ Voriconazole, a triazole, is considered the drug of choice for primary therapy in all patient populations, including SOT recipients. This recommendation is based on a randomized trial of voriconazole compared with amphotericin B deoxycholate for treatment of IA in mostly hematopoietic stem cell transplant recipients and patients with hematologic malignancies showing improved survival with voriconazole²⁰ and has been supported by additional studies of voriconazole treatment, including those in SOT recipients.¹⁰ Alternative antifungal therapies include liposomal or other lipid formulations of amphotericin and isavuconazole. A randomized trial showed noninferiority of isavuconazole compared with voriconazole in the treatment of IPA.²¹ In general, *Aspergillus* azole resistance in the United States is low (<3%), and routine antifungal susceptibility testing (AFST) for initial infection is not recommended except in the patient in whom azole resistance is suspected or who is unresponsive to antifungal therapy.¹⁵ Resistance to the echinocandins is also uncommon, as is amphotericin resistance with the exception of particular species such as *A terreus*.¹⁵ Combination therapy (usually voriconazole plus an echinocandin) appears promising particularly for use in severe disease and has shown reduced mortality in some SOT recipients.²² Tracheobronchial aspergillosis (TBA) occurs primarily in lung transplant recipients, affecting 4% to 6% of this patient population usually within 3 to 6 months posttransplant.^{15,23} Risk factors for TBA include exposure of the lung allograft to the environment, *Aspergillus* colonization pretransplant and posttransplant, high degree of immune suppression, impaired mucociliary clearance, and pulmonary denervation.²⁴ Recommended treatment of TBA includes a mold-active triazole and adjunctive inhaled amphotericin, given associated anastomotic endobronchial ischemia or ischemic reperfusion injury due to airway ischemia.¹⁵ Duration of therapy is usually 6 to 12 weeks for IPA depending on disease response to treatment and degree of immune suppression, at least 3 months for TBA or until resolution of infection.^{10,15} Adjunctive therapies for IA include reduction in immune suppression, surgery for localized disease, and colony-stimulating factors or granulocyte infusions for neutropenic patients.¹⁵ Although an optimal prophylaxis strategy has not been defined for SOT recipients, prophylaxis for IA is indicated for certain high-risk SOT populations. **Table 1** summarizes a prophylaxis strategy for high-risk SOT recipients.

MUCORMYCOSIS

Invasive mucormycosis (IM) is caused by Zygomycetes (order Mucorales) and is rare, making up only 2% of fungal infections in SOT recipients with overall incidence of 0.07% at 1 year posttransplant.²⁵ However, this infection has a high fatality rate with 90-day survival of only 50% to 60%.²⁶ Traditional risk factors for IM include uncontrolled diabetes mellitus, corticosteroids, and neutropenia as well as renal failure, reactivation of immunomodulating herpesviruses, malnutrition, and prior voriconazole and/or caspofungin use in SOT recipients.^{27,28} Clinically important species of Zygomycetes include *Rhizopus*, *Mucor*, *Rhizomucor*, *Cunninghamella*, *Absidia*, *Apo-physomyces*, and *Myocladus*.⁷ Clinical disease spectrum includes pulmonary disease as the most common, but can also include rhino-sino-orbital (including extension to the brain), disseminated, gastrointestinal, and primary cutaneous

Table 1 Prophylaxis recommendations for invasive aspergillosis in solid organ transplant recipients			
Organ Type	Risk Factors	Antifungal Prophylaxis	Duration
Lung	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Colonization with <i>Aspergillus</i> pretransplant or posttransplant• Mold infection in explanted lungs• Fungal infections in the sinuses• Single lung recipients	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Systemic triazole (voriconazole or itraconazole) OR inhaled amphotericin B product• For patients with listed risk factors, systemic voriconazole or itraconazole is preferred	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 3–4 mo posttransplant• Reinitiation of antifungal prophylaxis should occur if receiving thymoglobulin, alemtuzumab, or high-dose corticosteroids
Liver	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Retransplantation• Renal failure, particularly requiring dialysis• Transplantation for fulminant hepatic failure• Reoperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lipid formulation of amphotericin B OR an echinocandin	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Initial hospital stay or 4 wk posttransplant
Heart	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pretransplant <i>Aspergillus</i> colonization• Reoperation• Cytomegalovirus disease• Posttransplant renal failure requiring hemodialysis• Presence of IA in the transplant program within 2 mo or transplant	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Itraconazole OR voriconazole	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 50–150 d

Adapted from Singh N, Husain S. AST infectious diseases community of practice. Aspergillosis in solid organ transplantation. *Am J Transplant* 2013;13(suppl 4):230; with permission.

disease.^{6,29,30} Lung infection may present with consolidation/mass lesions, nodules, or cavities.²⁹ Disseminated infection can involve essentially any organ, including the lungs, heart, brain, liver, esophagus, stomach, small and large bowel, kidney, retroperitoneum, thyroid, and skin.⁷ Primary cutaneous infection can occur at sites of surgical incisions or drains, intravenous catheter sites, and after skin trauma. Lesions may present with black necrosis with surrounding cellulitis, thrombophlebitis, or extension to deeper structures.²⁸ Lung and liver transplant recipients appear to be at highest risk for IM with infections occurring at a median of 6 months after transplant, but may occur as early as the first month post-transplant in liver transplant recipients.²⁹

Diagnosis typically requires an invasive procedure such as biopsy, fine-needle aspiration, bronchoscopy, endoscopy, or surgical exploration.²⁸ CT chest imaging may show a reverse halo sign, an area of ground glass opacity with a ring of consolidation. Staining shows broad, ribbonlike, nonseptate hyphae with irregular walls and 90° angle branching (Figs. 2 and 3). Diagnosis may be made by histology, culture, or both.^{28,31} PCR testing is being increasingly used for diagnosis of mucormycosis and appears to be highly sensitive.³² PCR testing of circulating DNA in serum may be a useful tool for both early detection and treatment monitoring.^{33,34} Treatment of

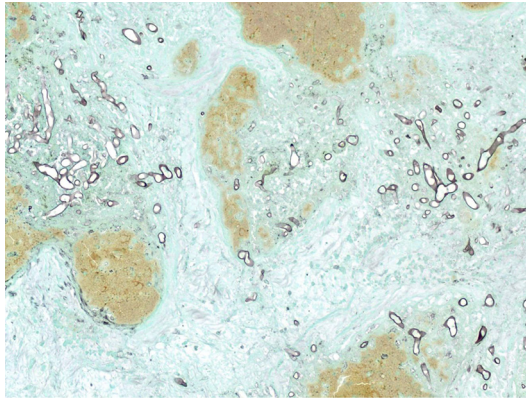


Fig. 2. Zygomycete in sinus vessel (GMS stain, magnification $\times 200$). (Courtesy of Dr Daniel Rhoads and Dr Wissam Dahoud, UH Cleveland Medical Center, Cleveland, OH; with permission.)

mucormycosis often requires surgical treatment with excision or debridement of necrotic tissues combined with antifungal therapy. Recommended induction therapy is with lipid formulation amphotericin B.³⁵ Isavuconazole is also now a first-line treatment option based on a recent single-arm open-label trial with case-control analysis showing efficacy similar to amphotericin B.³⁶ Use of combination therapy with an echinocandin and lipid amphotericin B has been described in animal models and retrospective reports.^{37–39} The combination of isavuconazole with micafungin has also been recently studied in murine models and in vitro studies showing synergy.^{40,41} Posaconazole can be used for salvage therapy in patients intolerant to or failing amphotericin B or as maintenance antifungal therapy.^{42–44} Isavuconazole can also be considered for maintenance and salvage therapy and has been reported to be successfully used for salvage in SOT patients.^{45–47}

Fusarium

Fusariosis accounts for less than 1% of IFIs in SOT recipients and may occur late in the posttransplant period with a median time to infection of 365 days.^{7,8} *Fusarium solani* is the most common species causing infection; other common species include *Fusarium oxysporum* and *Fusarium verticillioides*.⁴⁸ Exposure to fungi occurs by inhalation of airborne conidia or direct contact with contaminated material, such as soil, plants, or other organic matter.⁷ The clinical spectrum of fusariosis includes superficial cutaneous infection, localized infections especially of the respiratory tract and sinuses, and disseminated infection.^{49,50} Risk of infection can vary by transplant type, but lung transplant recipients appear particularly vulnerable to pulmonary fusariosis.⁵¹ Primary skin infection due to direct inoculation may present with skin nodules, ulcers, cellulitis, or subcutaneous abscesses that can resemble ecthyma gangrenosum.⁴⁹ Localized infections are most common in the respiratory tract and sinuses, but can also include septic arthritis, endophthalmitis, osteomyelitis, cystitis, and brain abscess.⁵² Disseminated infection occurs when 2 or more noncontiguous sites/organs are affected and may involve the gastrointestinal tract, liver, heart valves, kidneys, lungs, central nervous system (CNS), and skin.⁷ Disseminated infection often is associated with characteristic skin lesions that may appear as targetoid red or violaceous painful nodules, which often ulcerate with an eschar.^{52,53}

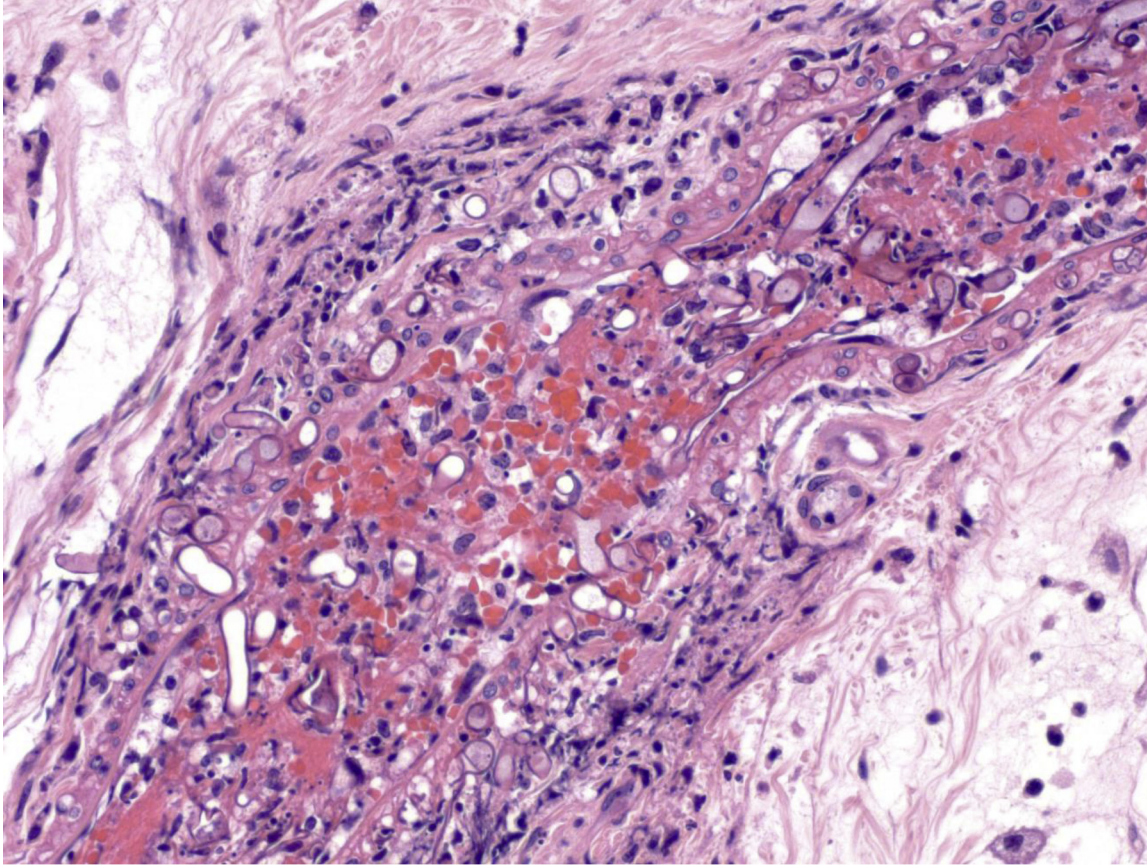


Fig. 3. Zygomyces in sinus vessel (hematoxylin and eosin stain, magnification $\times 400$). (Courtesy of Dr Daniel Rhoads and Dr Wissam Dahoud, UH Cleveland Medical Center, Cleveland, OH; with permission.)

Diagnoses of fusariosis can be made by skin biopsy in cases of cutaneous involvement. Unlike many other mold infections, *Fusarium* frequently grows from blood cultures in disseminated infections and has been reported to be positive in 40% of cases.⁵⁴ Histopathologic appearance is similar to *Aspergillus* with acute branching septate hyphae. Culture testing should involve identification to the species level and AFST whenever possible to help guide therapy.^{55,56} Nonculture biomarkers, such as GM and (1-3)- β -D-glucan, may be helpful adjuncts to diagnosis, but their exact role has not been defined.^{7,57} Molecular PCR testing appears promising but has not been standardized for diagnosis.⁵⁵ Treatment of fusariosis depends on the site and extent of infection, the specific *Fusarium* species and its antifungal susceptibilities, as well as underlying host factors.⁵¹ Surgical excision or debridement should be considered when feasible particularly for primary cutaneous and localized infections. Antifungal therapy is often guided based on species and antifungal susceptibilities. Amphotericin B, including lipid formulations and voriconazole, is first-line therapy for fusariosis; *F. solani* appears to be more susceptible to amphotericin than the triazoles.⁵¹ Posaconazole also has been used for primary and salvage therapy.^{58,59} Combination therapy with amphotericin B and voriconazole or another triazole should be considered while awaiting identification and susceptibility data and/or in severe infection.^{6,60} Overall mortality of fusariosis remains high with estimates ranging from 44% to 67% in various series, but lung transplant recipients appear to have a higher mortality at 67%.^{48,51,61} SOT recipients with localized infection tend to have a better outcome than patients with hematological malignancies or bone marrow transplant.⁵⁰

Scedosporium/Pseudallescheria

Scedosporium and *Pseudallescheria* species are found in soil and water, with infections usually occurring by inhalation of spores or by direct contact. Predominant species causing infection include *Scedosporium apiospermum*, *Pseudallescheria boydii*, and *L. prolificans*. *S. apiospermum* had previously been considered the asexual state of *P. boydii* but is now considered a distinct species.⁶² Lung transplant recipients are at risk for infection, particularly in cystic fibrosis (CF) patients, who are often colonized before transplant.^{63,64} Other SOT recipients can also be affected, with clinical spectrum including localized infections of respiratory tract, sinuses, surgical site, and skin as well as disseminated infections involving the brain/CNS, eye, blood vessels, heart, bone, and joints.^{65–67} Median time to infection after transplant is reported to be 4 months.⁶⁷ Diagnosis is by biopsy of affected tissues with culture and pathology, and histopathologic appearance is similar to *Aspergillus*.⁶ Blood cultures may be positive in greater than 50% of *L. prolificans* disseminated infections due to hematogenous spread.⁵⁵ Antifungal treatment of scedosporiosis should be directed by species identification and AFST of clinical isolates due to variable susceptibility to antifungal agents, with many species resistant to amphotericin B.^{55,68} Voriconazole is usually considered first-line therapy and appears to be associated with better survival in transplant recipients than other therapies.^{55,69,70} Surgical debridement should be considered whenever feasible and may be the primary therapy in *L. prolificans* infections in which the organism may be resistant to all antifungals.⁷¹ Combination therapy of voriconazole plus an echinocandin or terbinafine should be considered in severe or resistant infections.^{55,72} CF patients known to be colonized with *Scedosporium* pre-lung transplant should be given antifungal prophylaxis, usually with a triazole.⁶⁴ Mortality from scedosporiosis is high, ranging from 58% to 72% in transplant recipients.^{67,69}

Table 2
Summary of important fungal pathogens in solid organ transplant recipients

Fungal Pathogen	Important Species	Risk Factors/Transplant Type	Clinical Manifestations	Diagnosis	Treatment
Aspergillus	<i>A fumigatus</i> , <i>A flavus</i> , <i>A niger</i> , <i>A terreus</i>	Neutropenia Lung, liver, heart	IPA (most common) TBA (lung transplant) Disseminated	Narrow, septate hyphae with acute angle branching	Voriconazole
Zygomycetes	Rhizopus, Mucor, Rhizomucor, Absidia, Cunninghamella, Apophysomyces, Myocladus	Uncontrolled DM Corticosteroids Neutropenia Renal failure Immunomodulating viruses Malnutrition Prior voriconazole/caspofungin use Liver, lung, kidney	Pulmonary (most common) Rhino-sino-orbital Disseminated Primary cutaneous Gastrointestinal Bronchial anastomosis (lung transplant)	Broad, ribbonlike, nonseptate hyphae Molecular testing	Lipid formulation amphotericin Surgical debridement when feasible
Fusarium	<i>F solani</i> , <i>F oxysporum</i> , <i>F verticillioides</i>	Lung, liver	Pulmonary Primary cutaneous Disseminated (often involving skin) Sinusitis Osteomyelitis/septic arthritis Endophthalmitis Brain abscess	Histopathology similar to Aspergillus Blood cultures may be positive	Amphotericin B or voriconazole Surgical debridement when feasible

Scedosporium/ pseudallescheria	<i>S apiospermum</i> , <i>P boydii</i> , <i>Lomentospora prolificans</i>	Lung	Pulmonary Sinusitis Surgical site Skin Disseminated	Histopathology similar to Aspergillus Blood cultures may be positive with <i>L prolificans</i>	Voriconazole Combination therapy Surgical debridement when feasible
Dematiaceous fungi (dark molds)	<i>Alternaria</i> , <i>Exophiala</i> , <i>Curvularia</i> , <i>Cladosporium</i> , <i>Ochroconis</i> , <i>Bipolaris</i>	All SOT types	Skin (nodules, abscesses, ulcers) Pulmonary Disseminated	Septate hyphae with GMS silver stain Fontana-Masson staining with melanin	Surgical excision of cutaneous lesions Triazoles
Paecilomyces		Heart, lung	Skin and soft tissue Peritonitis Sternal wound infection	Irregular septate hyphae	Voriconazole or posaconazole Surgical debridement when feasible

Abbreviation: DM, diabetes mellitus.

Adapted from Refs. [6,7,10](#)

Dematiaceous Fungi (Dark Molds)

The dematiaceous, or dark-pigmented, molds can cause the invasive infections phaeohyphomycosis, chromoblastomycosis, or mycetoma.⁷³ Primary cutaneous infections are the most common clinical presentation in SOT recipients and can cause subcutaneous nodules, abscesses, pustules, or purulent ulcerations.^{6,74} Other sites of infection include the lungs and disseminated infection with CNS involvement. The most important pathogens causing infection in this group include *Alternaria*, *Exophiala*, *Curvularia*, *Cladosporium*, *Ochroconis*, and *Bipolaris*.^{7,73} Time to infection posttransplant can be long, ranging from 2 months to 11 years with a median of 685 days.^{73,74} Diagnosis is usually by biopsy with histopathology and culture; septate hyphae are present with silver stain, and Fontana-Masson staining can demonstrate the presence of melanin.⁶ Surgical excision is the mainstay of treatment of primary cutaneous lesions and may not require antifungal therapy.⁷⁵ AFST should be used to guide therapy. First-line antifungal treatment includes voriconazole, posaconazole, and itraconazole; echinocandins and amphotericin B may also be useful.^{7,76} Combination antifungal therapy may be considered for CNS or disseminated infections.⁷⁶

PAECILOMYCES

Paecilomyces is a rare pathogen in SOT recipients and tends to cause localized skin and soft tissue infections, sometimes associated with other fungi or mycobacteria.^{77–79} Case reports have also described peritonitis in a liver transplant recipient and sternal wound infection in a lung transplant recipient.^{80,81} Histopathology of tissues may show irregular septate hyphae with Periodic acid-Schiff or Grocott's methenamine silver (GMS) stains but may appear similar to other molds.⁶ Surgical excision and debridement are recommended and may be sufficient for cutaneous infection; voriconazole or posaconazole can be used for more extensive disease, but antifungal susceptibilities may help guide therapy.^{6,7}

OTHER FUNGI

Numerous other fungi are rare but potentially emerging causes of mold infection in SOT recipients. These fungi include *Scopulariopsis*, *Trichoderma*, and *Acremonium* species in which various localized and disseminated infections have been described.^{82–84} Treatment generally involves surgical excision when possible and antifungal therapy based on susceptibility testing.^{6,7}

Table 2 summarizes the clinical manifestations, diagnosis, and treatment of important mold infections in SOT recipients.

SUMMARY

Mold infections remain an important cause of infection in SOT recipients, and a high level of clinical suspicion and vigilance are required for diagnosis and management. Advancements in diagnostics, such as molecular testing, may improve diagnosis in the future. The role of routine AFST for mold infections and the microbiologic definitions of antifungal resistance are still being determined. More data are needed regarding a correlation between antifungal susceptibilities and clinical outcomes.⁸⁵ The role of newer antifungal therapies, such as isavuconazole, in primary and salvage treatment is still evolving. Further research into the epidemiology, clinical manifestations, diagnosis, approach to prophylaxis, treatment, and outcomes of these infections is needed.

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