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atlas of nerve conduction studies and electromyography

Published: September 19, 2026 | Index ID: #-

Atlas of Nerve Conduction Studies and Electromyography: A Comprehensive Guide

In the realm of neuromuscular diagnostics, the combination of nerve conduction studies (NCS) and electromyography (EMG) serves as a cornerstone for uncovering the underlying causes of muscle weakness, sensory loss, and abnormal reflexes. While clinicians and students often encounter textbook descriptions of these tests, the practical interpretation of results can be daunting without a visual reference. An atlas that systematically presents electrode placements, waveform examples, and normative tables transforms raw data into actionable insights.

This article offers an in-depth exploration of the atlas of nerve conduction studies and electromyography. We will walk through the fundamentals of each test, examine how the atlas is structured, and demonstrate how to apply its visuals to real-world clinical scenarios. Whether you are a neurologist, a physiatrist, a medical student, or a seasoned researcher, this guide will equip you with the knowledge to navigate electrophysiologic findings with confidence.

Understanding Nerve Conduction Studies (NCS)

What Is NCS?

Nerve conduction studies measure the speed and strength of electrical impulses traveling along peripheral nerves. By delivering a small electrical stimulus and recording the response, clinicians can assess both motor and sensory pathways. The resulting data reveal whether a nerve's conduction velocity is slowed, whether amplitude is reduced, or whether conduction blocks exist.

Key Parameters Measured

- Conduction Velocity: The distance traveled per unit time, typically expressed in meters per second (m/s). Slower velocities indicate demyelination or axonal loss.
- Amplitude: The height of the recorded wave, reflecting the number of functioning nerve fibers. Lower amplitudes suggest axonal degeneration.
- Latency: The time between stimulus and response, useful for detecting conduction blocks.
- F-Wave Latency: A late response that evaluates proximal nerve segments and the anterior horn cells.
- Compound Muscle Action Potential (CMAP): The summed electrical activity of all muscle fibers innervated by a motor nerve.
- Sensory Nerve Action Potential (SNAP): The summed activity of sensory fibers in response to stimulation.

Common Indications

NCS is routinely employed to investigate:

1. Peripheral nerve neuropathies (e.g., diabetic neuropathy, toxic neuropathy)
2. Mononeuropathies (e.g., carpal tunnel syndrome, ulnar nerve entrapment)
3. Polyneuropathies (e.g., Guillain-Barré syndrome, chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy)
4. Radiculopathies and plexopathies
5. Reflex disorders and conduction block syndromes

Electromyography (EMG) Explained

What Is EMG?

Electromyography records the electrical activity of muscles at rest and during contraction. By inserting a fine needle electrode into the muscle, EMG captures spontaneous activity, motor unit potentials (MUPs), and recruitment patterns. These signals provide insight into muscle health, motor neuron integrity, and the presence of denervation.

Procedure Steps

- Preparation: The patient is positioned comfortably, and the skin is cleaned to reduce impedance.
- Resting EMG: The needle is inserted into the target muscle while the patient relaxes. Spontaneous activity such as fibrillation potentials or positive sharp waves is recorded.
- Active EMG: The patient performs graded contractions. Motor unit potentials are analyzed for amplitude, duration, and shape.
- Interference Pattern: The density and organization of MUPs during maximal effort help assess recruitment efficiency.

Interpreting EMG Findings

Key EMG features include:

- Denervation: Fibrillation potentials, positive sharp waves, or complex repetitive discharges indicate ongoing muscle fiber loss.
- Reinnervation: Large, polyphasic motor unit potentials with increased amplitude and duration suggest collateral sprouting.
- Myopathic Patterns: Small, brief, polyphasic MUPs with reduced recruitment hint at primary muscle disease.
- Neural Patterns: Large, long-duration MUPs with normal recruitment point to motor neuron or peripheral nerve pathology.

The Atlas: Visualizing NCS and EMG Results

Standard Electrode Placement Charts

The atlas begins with detailed diagrams illustrating the precise locations for stimulating and recording electrodes. For motor studies, the stimulating electrode is placed proximal to the muscle, while the recording electrode sits over the muscle belly. Sensory studies involve placing the stimulating electrode distal to the recording site. These charts serve as a quick reference, ensuring consistency across examinations.

Typical Waveform Examples

Each section of the atlas includes high-resolution images of normal and abnormal waveforms. For instance, a normal median nerve CMAP shows a sharp, high-amplitude peak with a latency of 3.5 ms, whereas a demyelinated median nerve displays a prolonged latency and reduced velocity. Similarly, EMG images depict the contrast between a healthy muscle’s clean, low-amplitude activity and a denervated muscle’s fibrillation potentials.

Comparative Tables of Normal vs Pathologic Values

Comprehensive tables provide reference ranges for conduction velocity, amplitude, and latency across different nerves and age groups. By juxtaposing these values with patient data, clinicians can quickly identify deviations and prioritize differential diagnoses.

Common Neuromuscular Disorders and Their Electrophysiologic Signatures

Peripheral Nerve Injuries

Traumatic lesions often result in reduced CMAP amplitude and prolonged latency. The atlas demonstrates how a radial nerve transection manifests as absent wrist extension potentials, while a median nerve crush injury shows conduction block with preserved distal velocities.

Guillain-Barré Syndrome

Acute inflammatory demyelinating polyradiculoneuropathy typically presents with slowed conduction velocities, prolonged distal latencies, and conduction blocks in both motor and sensory fibers. F-wave latencies are markedly prolonged, reflecting proximal nerve involvement.

Poliomyelitis and Chronic Inflammatory Demyelinating Polyneuropathy (CIDP)

Poliomyelitis is characterized by pronounced axonal loss: CMAP amplitudes are severely reduced, and SNAPs may be absent. CIDP shows a mix of demyelination and axonal loss, with slowed velocities and temporal dispersion. The atlas highlights the distinguishing features between these two conditions.

Myasthenia Gravis

While primarily a neuromuscular junction disorder, EMG can reveal repetitive discharges and decremental responses to low-frequency stimulation. The atlas includes sample EMG traces demonstrating the characteristic jitter and blocking patterns.

Muscular Dystrophies

EMG in dystrophies displays small, short-duration MUPs with early recruitment, indicating primary muscle pathology. The atlas contrasts this with the larger, prolonged potentials seen in neuropathic conditions.

Peripheral Neuropathies (Diabetic, Toxic, etc.)

Diabetic neuropathy often shows a symmetrical reduction in SNAP amplitudes and slowed velocities. Toxic neuropathies may present with a patchy pattern of conduction block. The atlas provides visual examples of both scenarios, aiding in differential diagnosis.

Interpreting the Atlas: Practical Tips for Clinicians

Step by Step Analysis

1. Verify Electrode Placement: Use the atlas charts to confirm correct positioning before interpreting data.
2. Compare Against Normative Tables: Check conduction velocities, amplitudes, and latencies against age- and sex-matched references.
3. Identify Patterns: Look for conduction block, temporal dispersion, or uniform slowing to differentiate demyelination from axonal loss.
4. Correlate EMG Findings: Match spontaneous activity and MUP characteristics to the electrophysiologic patterns noted in NCS.
5. Integrate Clinical History: Combine electrophysiologic data with symptom onset, distribution, and progression.

Common Pitfalls

- Improper Stimulus Intensity: Low stimulus can lead to false negatives; ensure adequate intensity per the atlas guidelines.
- Temperature Variations: Peripheral temperature affects conduction velocity; always document limb temperature.
- Overlooking Proximal Involvement: F-wave abnormalities may be missed if not systematically evaluated.
- Assuming Normal Latencies Are Sufficient: Even within normal ranges, subtle delays may indicate early

pathology.

Integrating Clinical Findings

The atlas encourages a holistic approach. For example, a patient with foot drop and a normal tibial nerve CMAP amplitude might have a proximal nerve root lesion, which the atlas helps identify via F-wave prolongation. Similarly, EMG evidence of active denervation in a muscle with normal NCS suggests a central motor neuron disease.

Advancements in NCS/EMG Technology

High-Resolution NCS

Modern equipment now captures microvolt-level signals, allowing detection of subtle changes in SNAPs that were previously invisible. The atlas includes updated waveform templates reflecting these high-resolution findings.

Ultrasound Guidance

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