ECG Diagnosis: Pulmonary Embolism

Joel T Levis, MD, PhD, FACEP, FAAEM

Figure 1. 12-lead ECG from a 68-year-old woman with new onset dyspnea on exertion.

Demonstrates sinus tachycardia, prominent S wave in lead I, with Q wave and T wave inversion in lead III (S, Q, T sign), with inverted T waves in leads V1-V6. ST-segment elevation in leads aVR and V1 is also present. A computed tomography angiogram of the chest was performed, which demonstrated multiple, bilateral pulmonary emboli (PE).

The S, Q, T sign (prominent S wave in lead I, Q wave and inverted T wave in lead III) is a sign of acute cor pulmonale (acute pressure and volume overload of the right ventricle because of pulmonary hypertension) and reflects right ventricular strain. This electrocardiogram (ECG) finding is present in 15% to 25% of patients ultimately diagnosed with pulmonary emboli (PE). Any cause of acute cor pulmonale can result in the S, Q, T findings on ECG, including PE, acute bronchospasms, pneumothorax, and other acute lung disorders. Other ECG findings noted during the acute phase of a PE include new right bundle branch block (complete or incomplete), rightward shift of the QRS axis, ST-segment elevation in V4, and aVR, generalized low amplitude QRS complexes, atrial premature contractions, sinus tachycardia, atrial fibrillation/flutter, and T wave inversions in leads V1-V6. The ECG is often abnormal in PE, but findings are neither sensitive nor specific for the diagnosis of PE. The greatest utility of the ECG in a patient with suspected PE is ruling out other life-threatening diagnoses (eg, acute myocardial infarction).

References

Joel T Levis, MD, PhD, FACEP, FAAEM, is a Senior Emergency Medicine Physician at the Santa Clara Medical Center, and Clinical Instructor of Emergency Medicine (Surgery) at Stanford University. He is the Medical Director for the Foothill College Paramedic Program in Los Altos, CA. E-mail: joel.levis@kp.org.