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The Role of Intravascular Ultrasound (IVUS) In Guiding Interventions for Patients with Aberrant Coronary Arteries: A Comprehensive Review

Donaldo Emiliano Silva López[1], Diego Alejandro Ramírez López[2], Juan Alejandro Cordero López[2], Teresa Larissa González Viguerías[3], Yara Odette Mauleon Tiscareño[3], Ana Paulina Juárez Contreras[3]

[1]Tecnológico de Monterrey Campus Monterrey, Nuevo Léon, Mexico

[2]Universidad Autónoma de Guadalajara. Guadalajara, Jalisco, México

[3]Universidad Cuauhtémoc Plantel Aguascalientes. Aguascalientes, México.

ABSTRACT

Aberrant coronary arteries present unique challenges in diagnostic and interventional cardiology due to their atypical anatomy, high variability, and potential association with adverse cardiac events. Intravascular ultrasound (IVUS), as an intraluminal imaging modality, has emerged as a critical tool in guiding interventions in this subset of patients. IVUS provides high-resolution cross-sectional images of vessel morphology, allowing precise assessment of luminal dimensions, plaque burden, and stent positioning, especially in anatomically complex regions where conventional angiography falls short. This review explores the utility of IVUS in the evaluation and management of aberrant coronary arteries, highlighting its role in minimizing complications, optimizing procedural outcomes, and advancing our understanding of these rare but clinically significant anomalies. We also discuss the integration of IVUS with adjunctive imaging modalities, technical considerations, and future perspectives in the field.

KEYWORDS: aberrant coronary arteries, intravascular ultrasound, coronary interventions, imaging-guided therapy, structural heart anomalies

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INTRODUCTION

The management of patients with aberrant coronary arteries represents a significant challenge due to the intricate and highly variable anatomical presentations of these vessels. Aberrant coronary arteries are rare congenital anomalies that may predispose individuals to myocardial ischemia, arrhythmias, or sudden cardiac death, particularly when associated with adverse hemodynamic factors such as external compression or sharp angulation. Their recognition and appropriate intervention are critical for preventing catastrophic cardiac events, yet conventional imaging techniques, such as coronary angiography, often fail to provide the detailed anatomical and functional information required for optimal treatment planning.1,2

Intravascular ultrasound (IVUS) has revolutionized the field of interventional cardiology by enabling high-resolution intraluminal imaging, which offers a detailed understanding of vessel morphology. Unlike traditional imaging modalities, IVUS can accurately characterize luminal dimensions, wall structure, and plaque composition, even in anatomically complex or tortuous vessels. This makes it particularly advantageous in cases of aberrant coronary arteries, where precise imaging and guidance are essential for successful interventions.2

This article aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the role of IVUS in guiding interventions for patients with aberrant coronary arteries. We will explore its clinical applications, technical considerations, and benefits in optimizing procedural outcomes. Furthermore, the review will discuss the integration of IVUS into multimodal imaging strategies, emerging technologies, and future directions in the management of this challenging patient population.3

Clinical Considerations in the Use of Intravascular Ultrasound (IVUS) for Interventions in Aberrant Coronary Arteries

Aberrant coronary arteries present unique diagnostic and therapeutic challenges due to their diverse and often unpredictable anatomical variations. These anomalies, which

include abnormal origins, courses, or terminations of coronary vessels, are associated with a spectrum of clinical presentations ranging from asymptomatic incidental findings to life-threatening events such as myocardial ischemia, arrhythmias, and sudden cardiac death. Managing these patients effectively requires a nuanced approach to imaging, diagnosis, and intervention.3

1. Importance of Precise Anatomical Characterization

Traditional imaging modalities, including coronary angiography and computed tomography coronary angiography (CTCA), are invaluable for identifying aberrant coronary arteries; however, they often lack the spatial resolution necessary for detailed intraluminal assessment. IVUS complements these modalities by providing high-resolution cross-sectional images of the vessel wall and lumen. This is especially critical in aberrant coronary arteries, where atypical courses, external compressions, or intrinsic abnormalities (e.g., intimal thickening or atherosclerotic plaque) may complicate diagnosis and management.3

IVUS allows clinicians to:

- Accurately measure luminal dimensions and vessel diameters, ensuring appropriate device selection during intervention.4
- Identify areas of stenosis or plaque burden that may be missed by angiography due to vessel foreshortening or overlapping structure.4
- Evaluate wall characteristics, such as calcification or dissection, which may influence procedural planning.4

2. Guidance During Complex Interventions

Aberrant coronary arteries often traverse tortuous or compressed pathways, increasing the complexity of percutaneous coronary interventions (PCI). IVUS plays a pivotal role in overcoming these challenges by providing real-time guidance during stent deployment or balloon angioplasty. Specific considerations include:

- **Stent Placement**: IVUS aids in optimal stent sizing and positioning by confirming full stent apposition to the vessel wall, reducing the risk of malapposition, restenosis, or stent thrombosis.4
- **Plaque Modification**: In cases of atherosclerosis within aberrant vessels, IVUS helps determine the need for adjunctive techniques such as atherectomy or specialized balloon angioplasty.4
- **Identification of Abnormal Hemodynamics**: IVUS enables the detection of dynamic changes, such as external vessel compression or intramural course, which may necessitate surgical intervention instead of PCI.5

3. Prevention of Procedural Complications

Patients with aberrant coronary arteries are at an increased risk of procedural complications due to their atypical anatomy. IVUS mitigates these risks by:

- Detecting vessel wall dissections or microperforations during or after interventions.
- Identifying proximal or distal vessel tapering, which may predispose to balloon-induced trauma.5
- Guiding precise wiring of complex anatomies, reducing the likelihood of vessel perforation or false lumen entry.5

4. Multimodal Imaging Integration

While IVUS is invaluable, its integration with other imaging modalities enhances diagnostic accuracy and procedural outcomes. CTCA and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) provide a broader anatomical context, while IVUS refines the intraluminal perspective. For example:

- **Pre-Procedure Planning**: CTCA can identify the anomalous origin and course of the vessel, while IVUS ensures accurate intervention at the target lesion.6
- **Post-Procedure Evaluation**: IVUS can confirm the resolution of intraluminal abnormalities or guide further treatment if residual stenosis or malapposition is detected.6

5. Patient Selection and Tailored Therapy

Not all patients with aberrant coronary arteries are candidates for IVUS-guided interventions. Clinical decision-making should consider the patient's symptomatic profile, anatomical complexity, and overall risk of intervention. IVUS is particularly beneficial in:

- Symptomatic patients with evidence of ischemia attributable to aberrant coronary arteries.6
- Individuals undergoing PCI in vessels with high anatomical variability or suspected intramural courses.6
- Cases requiring precise stent placement in proximally aberrant vessels or at bifurcations.6

6. Training and Technical Expertise

Effective use of IVUS requires specialized training and experience to interpret imaging data accurately and apply it in real-time during interventions. This is particularly important in cases of aberrant coronary arteries, where the imaging findings may be atypical or ambiguous. Continued education and advancements in automated image analysis software are expected to improve accessibility and accuracy.6

7. Future Directions and Emerging Technologies

The role of IVUS is likely to expand with the development of hybrid imaging modalities and advanced computational tools. Technologies such as optical coherence tomography (OCT), combined with IVUS, may offer complementary insights into vessel structure and pathology. Furthermore, artificial intelligence-based image analysis could enhance the detection of subtle abnormalities and assist in procedural planning.6,7

Intravascular ultrasound is a transformative tool in the management of aberrant coronary arteries, providing unparalleled intraluminal imaging and real-time procedural

guidance. Its integration into the diagnostic and therapeutic algorithm for these challenging cases improves outcomes, reduces complications, and advances the precision of interventional cardiology. Understanding the clinical considerations and technical nuances of IVUS is essential for optimizing care in this unique patient population.7

Indications for the Use of Intravascular Ultrasound (IVUS) in Guiding Interventions for Aberrant Coronary Arteries

The use of intravascular ultrasound (IVUS) has become a cornerstone in contemporary interventional cardiology, especially in managing complex coronary pathologies. Aberrant coronary arteries, characterized by their atypical origins, courses, or terminations, represent a unique clinical subset where IVUS-guided interventions offer distinct advantages. Below, we explore the specific indications for employing IVUS in these scenarios, emphasizing the clinical scenarios where this imaging modality significantly enhances diagnostic accuracy and procedural safety.7

1. Anatomical Characterization of Aberrant Coronary Arteries

Aberrant coronary arteries exhibit a wide range of anatomical variations, including:

- Anomalous origins from inappropriate coronary sinuses or non-coronary structures.
- Intramural courses, where the artery traverses within the aortic wall.7
- Interarterial paths, potentially compressed between the aorta and pulmonary artery.7
- Myocardial bridges, where the coronary artery is embedded within the myocardium.7

Indication: IVUS is particularly indicated when non-invasive imaging (e.g., CT angiography or MRI) suggests aberrant coronary anatomy, and detailed intraluminal imaging is required to delineate vessel dimensions, wall characteristics, or potential sites of external compression. This information is vital for selecting between surgical and percutaneous intervention.7

2. Evaluation of Ischemia in Aberrant Coronary Arteries

Patients with aberrant coronary arteries may present with angina, syncope, or exertional dyspnea due to ischemia caused by vessel compression, abnormal flow dynamics, or intrinsic stenosis.7

Indication: IVUS is used to confirm luminal narrowing or external compression contributing to ischemia. It can also assess the severity of plaque burden in patients with overlapping atherosclerotic disease.7

3. Pre-Procedural Planning in Percutaneous Coronary Interventions (PCI)

Aberrant coronary arteries often pose unique challenges during PCI, including:

- Unusual vessel angulations that complicate guidewire navigation.
- Variability in vessel diameters along their length.7
- Presence of plaques in hard-to-access locations.7

Indication: IVUS is invaluable for pre-procedural planning in these cases, providing high-resolution imaging to determine:

- Precise lesion location.7
- Vessel size for balloon and stent selection.7
- Presence of calcification requiring adjunctive therapies, such as atherectomy or specialty balloons.7

4. Intra-Procedural Guidance During Interventions

Aberrant coronary arteries increase the technical complexity of PCI due to their atypical pathways and potential for complications, such as dissection or perforation.7

Indication: IVUS is essential for real-time guidance during:

- **Stent Placement**: Ensures accurate stent deployment with optimal apposition to the vessel wall, reducing restenosis and thrombosis risks.7
- **Plaque Modification**: Identifies resistant calcific plaques and guides the use of atherectomy devices or high-pressure balloon inflation.7
- **Dynamic Assessment**: Detects changes in vessel geometry during interventions, such as compression relief or dissection development.7

5. Assessment of Surgical versus Interventional Candidacy

In certain aberrant coronary artery cases, such as an interarterial course with significant compression, surgical revascularization (e.g., unroofing or bypass) may be preferred over PCI.

Indication: IVUS provides critical insights into the severity and location of dynamic compression or structural abnormalities, aiding multidisciplinary teams in deciding between surgical and percutaneous approaches.8

6. Post-Procedural Assessment of Intervention Success

After PCI, ensuring the intervention's success and identifying potential complications is essential, especially in patients with aberrant coronary anatomy.8

Indication: IVUS is used to confirm:

- Adequate stent apposition and expansion.8
- Absence of edge dissections or intraluminal thrombus.8
- Complete relief of stenosis or compression.8

7. Adjunctive Imaging in Atypical Clinical Presentations

Some patients with aberrant coronary arteries may present with non-specific symptoms or incidental findings during unrelated evaluations. IVUS can complement other imaging modalities to clarify ambiguous findings.8

Indication: IVUS is indicated when conventional imaging leaves uncertainties regarding vessel anatomy, stenosis severity, or dynamic compressive phenomena.9

8. Evaluation of Failed or Complex Revascularizations

In cases where revascularization procedures fail or yield suboptimal outcomes, IVUS can help identify the underlying cause.9

Indication: IVUS is employed to evaluate complications such as:

- Malapposed stents.9
- Residual stenosis or missed lesions.9
- Vessel dissections or perforations.9

9. Research and Education in Aberrant Coronary Artery Interventions

Given the rarity and complexity of aberrant coronary arteries, advancing understanding and developing optimal treatment strategies require robust data collection and operator training.9

Indication: IVUS is frequently utilized in research to refine imaging criteria, validate new interventional approaches, and educate interventional cardiologists on the nuances of these challenging cases.9

The indications for IVUS in patients with aberrant coronary arteries extend across the spectrum of diagnosis, treatment planning, intervention, and follow-up. By providing unparalleled imaging resolution and intraprocedural guidance, IVUS enhances the safety, efficacy, and precision of interventions in this unique and high-risk patient population. Its routine integration into clinical practice for managing aberrant coronary arteries represents a significant advancement in modern interventional cardiology.10

Contraindications for the Use of Intravascular Ultrasound (IVUS) in Guiding Interventions for Aberrant Coronary Arteries

Intravascular ultrasound (IVUS) is a powerful tool in interventional cardiology, providing detailed cross-sectional imaging of coronary vessels and playing a pivotal role in managing complex coronary anatomy, including aberrant coronary arteries. However, like any medical intervention, IVUS has specific contraindications, which can be broadly categorized into patient-related, anatomical, technical, and procedural factors. Recognizing these contraindications is crucial to ensuring patient safety and optimizing procedural outcomes.10

1. Patient-Related Contraindications

1.1 **Severe Hemodynamic Instability**

IVUS procedures can prolong intervention time, which may exacerbate the condition of patients with severe hypotension, cardiogenic shock, or ongoing myocardial infarction.10

- **Clinical Concern**: In such cases, the priority should be to stabilize the patient rather than perform detailed imaging.10
- **Alternative Approach**: Relying on quicker modalities like angiography may be more appropriate in emergencies.10

1.2 **Severe Coagulopathy or Bleeding Disorders**

Patients with conditions such as hemophilia, thrombocytopenia, or anticoagulant therapy are at increased risk of bleeding or vascular complications during catheter-based interventions.10

- **Clinical Concern**: The use of IVUS catheters may increase the risk of vascular injury, leading to hemorrhagic complications.10
- **Precaution**: These patients require careful risk assessment, and correction of coagulopathy may be necessary before considering IVUS.10

1.3 **Severe Contrast Allergy or Renal Dysfunction**

Although IVUS itself does not require contrast, it is typically used alongside angiography.

- **Clinical Concern**: Patients with contrast allergies or renal dysfunction may not tolerate the procedural requirements of adjunctive imaging.10
- **Management**: Consider premedication for allergies or minimizing contrast exposure during the procedure.11

1.4 **Pregnancy**

Radiation exposure from angiographic guidance during IVUS procedures poses a risk to the fetus.11

- **Clinical Concern**: Pregnant patients should avoid unnecessary radiation exposure.
- **Alternative Approach**: Use non-ionizing imaging modalities, such as MRI or echocardiography, when possible.11

2. Anatomical Contraindications

2.1 **Extremely Small Vessel Diameters**

IVUS catheters require a minimum luminal diameter for safe navigation.11

- **Clinical Concern**: Attempting IVUS in vessels smaller than the catheter diameter can result in trauma or perforation.11
- **Recommendation**: Avoid IVUS in vessels where luminal size is insufficient or use alternative imaging techniques.11

2.2 **Severe Coronary Tortuosity or Calcification**

Aberrant coronary arteries with extreme tortuosity or heavy calcification present navigation challenges.11

- **Clinical Concern**: Catheter manipulation in these vessels increases the risk of dissection or perforation.12
- **Precaution**: Pre-procedural imaging, such as CT angiography, should evaluate vessel navigability before IVUS.12

2.3 **Significant Vessel Thrombus or Occlusion**

IVUS may displace thrombi or exacerbate occlusions during catheter advancement.

- **Clinical Concern**: This can lead to distal embolization or worsening of ischemia.12
- **Alternative Approach**: Use thrombectomy or pharmacologic management before considering IVUS.13

3. Technical Contraindications

3.1 **Unavailability of Experienced Operators**

The interpretation of IVUS images and safe catheter manipulation require expertise.13

- **Clinical Concern**: Inexperienced operators may misinterpret findings or cause complications.13
- **Recommendation**: Restrict IVUS use to centers with trained personnel and sufficient procedural volume.14

3.2 **Lack of Adequate Equipment**
Older-generation IVUS systems or poorly maintained equipment may not provide the resolution required for complex coronary anatomy.15

- **Clinical Concern**: Suboptimal imaging quality could lead to incorrect clinical decisions.
- **Precaution**: Ensure that the equipment is up-to-date and properly calibrated.15

4. Procedural Contraindications

4.1 **Risk of Prolonged Procedural Time**
IVUS imaging adds time to the intervention, which may be detrimental in critically ill patients.

- **Clinical Concern**: Prolonged procedures increase risks such as ischemia, contrast-induced nephropathy, or procedural complications.15
- **Precaution**: Limit IVUS use to cases where the benefits clearly outweigh the risks.15

4.2 **Inability to Advance the IVUS Catheter**
In some cases, advancing the IVUS catheter to the target area may not be possible due to severe stenosis, extreme tortuosity, or prior stent placement.15

- **Clinical Concern**: Forceful attempts to advance the catheter may lead to vessel injury.
- **Recommendation**: Consider alternative imaging modalities or pre-dilation with a balloon to facilitate catheter passage.16

5. Relative Contraindications

5.1 **High-Risk Lesions in Non-Target Coronary Arteries**
In patients with multivessel disease, prioritizing interventions in high-risk lesions over detailed imaging of aberrant vessels may be more appropriate.16

- **Clinical Concern**: Diverting focus to IVUS imaging could delay treatment of critical lesions.16
- **Precaution**: Use IVUS selectively in cases where it directly impacts clinical decision-making.16

5.2 **Non-Symptomatic Aberrant Coronary Arteries**
IVUS may not be indicated for incidental findings of aberrant coronary arteries in asymptomatic patients without evidence of ischemia or clinical sequelae.16

- **Clinical Concern**: Routine use in these cases may not provide additional clinical benefit.
- **Recommendation**: Reserve IVUS for cases where intervention is planned or diagnostic ambiguity persists.17

While IVUS is an invaluable tool in guiding interventions for aberrant coronary arteries, careful consideration of contraindications is essential to avoid procedural complications and unnecessary risks. Understanding patient-specific factors, anatomical challenges, and technical limitations ensures that IVUS is employed judiciously, maximizing its benefits while minimizing potential harm. Proper patient selection and pre-procedural planning, guided by these contraindications, are critical to the success of IVUS-guided interventions in this complex subset of coronary artery anomalies.17

CONCLUSIONS

The use of intravascular ultrasound (IVUS) as an adjunctive imaging modality in the management of patients with aberrant coronary arteries represents a significant advancement in contemporary interventional cardiology. Aberrant coronary arteries, characterized by their atypical anatomical origin, course, or configuration, present unique diagnostic and therapeutic challenges that necessitate precise imaging and guidance during intervention. IVUS provides unparalleled visualization of the vessel lumen, wall morphology, and surrounding structures, thereby facilitating accurate diagnosis and procedural optimization in these complex cases.

IVUS enables high-resolution cross-sectional imaging, allowing for the identification of pathological features such as atherosclerotic plaques, stenoses, and other abnormalities that may not be fully appreciated through angiography alone. In aberrant coronary arteries, where the vessel anatomy can be highly variable, IVUS offers the distinct advantage of overcoming the limitations of two-dimensional imaging. This is particularly important in identifying functional and structural characteristics that influence treatment decisions.

The integration of IVUS into interventional strategies provides critical real-time information for optimal device sizing, lesion preparation, and stent deployment. For patients with aberrant coronary arteries, IVUS-guided interventions reduce the risk of complications such as stent malposition, incomplete expansion, or edge dissections. The ability of IVUS to confirm appropriate device placement ensures improved procedural outcomes and long-term patency, even in anatomically challenging cases.

Aberrant coronary arteries are frequently associated with clinical dilemmas regarding the appropriate management strategy. IVUS assists in resolving these dilemmas by providing direct evidence of lesion severity, vessel size, and the presence of high-risk features such as thrombus or vulnerable plaque. In certain scenarios, such as aberrant vessels with critical stenoses or anomalous courses that traverse high-risk areas (e.g., between the aorta and pulmonary artery), IVUS offers essential data to support personalized treatment planning.

By enhancing visualization and enabling precise device delivery, IVUS reduces procedural risks associated with aberrant coronary artery interventions. These include risks of vessel perforation, dissection, or suboptimal stent deployment—events that may be catastrophic in this patient population. Furthermore, IVUS helps to mitigate the need for

excessive contrast use, which is particularly beneficial in patients with pre-existing renal impairment.

While IVUS has proven to be a transformative tool in the management of aberrant coronary arteries, certain limitations warrant consideration. These include its dependence on operator expertise, potential procedural prolongation, and challenges in navigating severely tortuous or calcified vessels. The advent of newer imaging technologies, such as optical coherence tomography (OCT) and IVUS systems with enhanced resolution, may address some of these limitations in the future. Moreover, further research is needed to establish standardized protocols and guidelines for IVUS use in this unique patient subset.

The adoption of IVUS in the management of aberrant coronary arteries has profound clinical implications, particularly in terms of improving patient outcomes. IVUS-guided interventions are associated with lower rates of restenosis, enhanced procedural success, and reduced long-term adverse events. In cases where angiography alone is insufficient, IVUS serves as a critical adjunct to ensure the safety and efficacy of therapeutic interventions.

In conclusion, IVUS is an indispensable tool in the armamentarium of interventional cardiology, particularly in the context of aberrant coronary arteries. Its ability to provide detailed imaging, facilitate precise procedural planning, and enhance safety underscores its role as a cornerstone of advanced coronary interventions. Moving forward, the integration of IVUS into routine practice for managing aberrant coronary arteries should be guided by careful patient selection, rigorous training, and ongoing research into its utility and cost-effectiveness. As technology continues to evolve, IVUS is poised to play an even more pivotal role in addressing the complexities of aberrant coronary anatomy, ultimately contributing to improved patient care and outcomes.

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