

# Case Report: Thoracolith Mimicking Pulmonary Osteosarcoma Metastasis

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## ABSTRACT

A thoracolith is a small (~5 to 15 mm) smooth calcified nodule typically found incidentally in the pleural space on chest radiographs or CT scans. Its key characteristic is mobility between imaging studies. While it is a benign entity, it can rarely cause a diagnostic dilemma. In this context, we present a patient with high-grade extrasosseous osteosarcoma with a thoracolith mimicking pulmonary osteosarcoma metastasis. Herein, we highlight the importance of comparing prior imaging studies to determine if there has been any positional change—indicating mobility—and diagnostic of a thoracolith, thereby obviating unnecessary workup or intervention.

## CASE REPORT

### INTRODUCTION

First reported by Dias et al. in 1968, thoracolithiasis is a condition where one or more smooth-margined nodules (~5 to 15 mm) are found within the pleural space and may contain calcification(s) [1]. The incidence of thoracolithiasis is 0.086%, with a slight female predominance [2]. Thoracoliths are most commonly detected incidentally on imaging and rarely can be a diagnostic challenge mimicking intrapulmonary nodules or malignant lesions on chest CTs.

Herein, we present a case of a patient with high-grade extrasosseous osteosarcoma of the left thigh with a new calcified pleuropulmonary nodule during follow-up chest CT imaging. It was initially suspected to be metastatic osteosarcoma. However, simply comparing previous and subsequent follow-up chest CT studies, it was determined to be a thoracolith demonstrating mobility—the crucial diagnostic feature—throughout multiple follow-up chest CT studies.

### CASE PRESENTATION

A 54-year-old man complained of a “knot” in his left thigh. An MRI (Figure 1) revealed an enhancing mass in the anteromedial left thigh, later confirmed as an extrasosseous osteosarcoma. Perioperative chest staging CT scan showed a calcified approximately 8 mm nodule in the left lower lobe. The nodule was suspected to be either a calcified granuloma or, in the worst case, an ossified pulmonary osteosarcoma metastasis.

Multiple subsequent chest CT studies (Figure 2) over 18 years, as part of oncologic follow-up at our institution and occasionally when the patient presented to the emergency room for other acute issues, demonstrate mobility and migration—the sine qua non and key diagnostic characteristic of a thoracolith, thus averting further workup, intervention, and, most importantly, clinician and patient angst. Therefore, the patient and oncology team opted not to confirm the diagnosis through thoroscopic intervention so as to avoid any unnecessary risks.

### DISCUSSION

Thoracoliths (thoracolithiasis when multiple) are rare and benign intrapleural bodies that are often asymptomatic. They can be calcified or non-calcified, have a smooth margin, and are—most importantly—migratory. They are frequently located in the dependent part of the thoracic cavity—this includes the diaphragmatic surface, left heart border, or paravertebral space—most likely due to gravity [3].

In most cases, thoracoliths are discovered incidentally during chest CT scans for other reasons. Although benign, thoracoliths can enlarge over time and may be difficult to distinguish from malignant lesions [1,4].

The exact cause of thoracolithiasis is not yet fully understood, but there are a few possible explanations:

1. Necrosis of pleural or epipericardial fat, supported by the presence of higher amounts of pericardial fat in the left

hemithorax [5].

2. Accumulation of dust particles phagocytosed by macrophages [5].

3. Previous pulmonary tuberculosis [6].

4. Spillage of gallstone(s) into the pleural space during a cholecystectomy [7].

5. Transdiaphragmatic migration of prior epiploic appendicitis or gallstone from the abdomen [7].

When a pleuroparenchymal nodule is diffusely calcified, as in our case, the differential diagnosis includes post-infectious granuloma, cement embolism, pneumoconiosis, hamartoma, and calcified metastasis [6]. Calcified mediastinal and hilar nodes, as well as splenic granulomas, are indicative of post-infectious granuloma. If branching or globular hyperdensities are found in pulmonary arteries, this suggests pulmonary cement embolism. Pneumoconiosis is characterized by the presence of perilymphatic nodules, calcified mediastinal lymphadenopathy, and pulmonary fibrosis. Benign hamartoma is favored if there are fat and popcorn-like calcifications present, as well as singularity. Calcified pulmonary metastasis may arise from non-bone forming tumors like germ cell tumor, synovial sarcoma, mucin-producing tumors, and papillary thyroid carcinoma, and bone-forming tumors like osteosarcoma and chondrosarcoma; a known history of such tumors would support this diagnosis. Although primary lung cancers can also present with calcifications, CT scans suggest that this occurs in up to 10% of cases [8].

*Comparative CT studies demonstrating mobility are crucial to confirm a thoracolith and avoid unnecessary further workup or intervention (i.e., pulmonary metastasectomy), as in our case. Suppose prior imaging studies are unavailable, and a prompt diagnosis of a thoracolith is required; in that case, repositioning the patient in the decubitus or prone position and getting a thoracolith to move and declare itself on the immediate rescans may also be helpful.*

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Conception of project: ES

Guarantors of integrity of study: AS, MW, SB, AT, ES

Manuscript drafting or manuscript revision for important intellectual content: AS, MW, ES; AS and MW contributed equally as first authors

Approval of final version of submitted manuscript: AS, MW, SB, AT, ES

Literature research: AS, ES

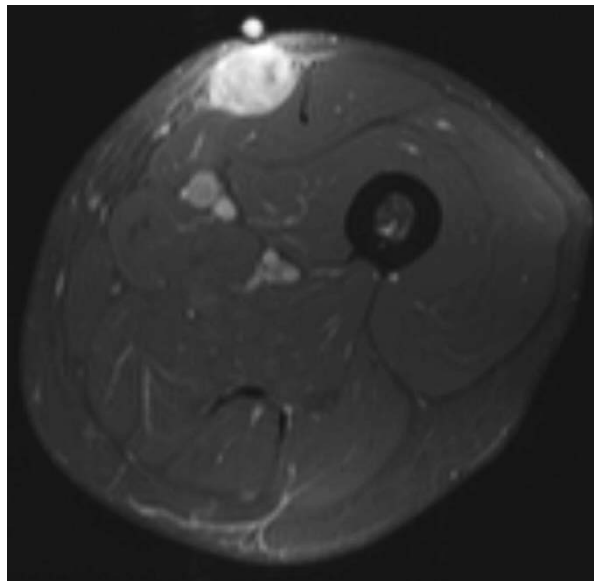
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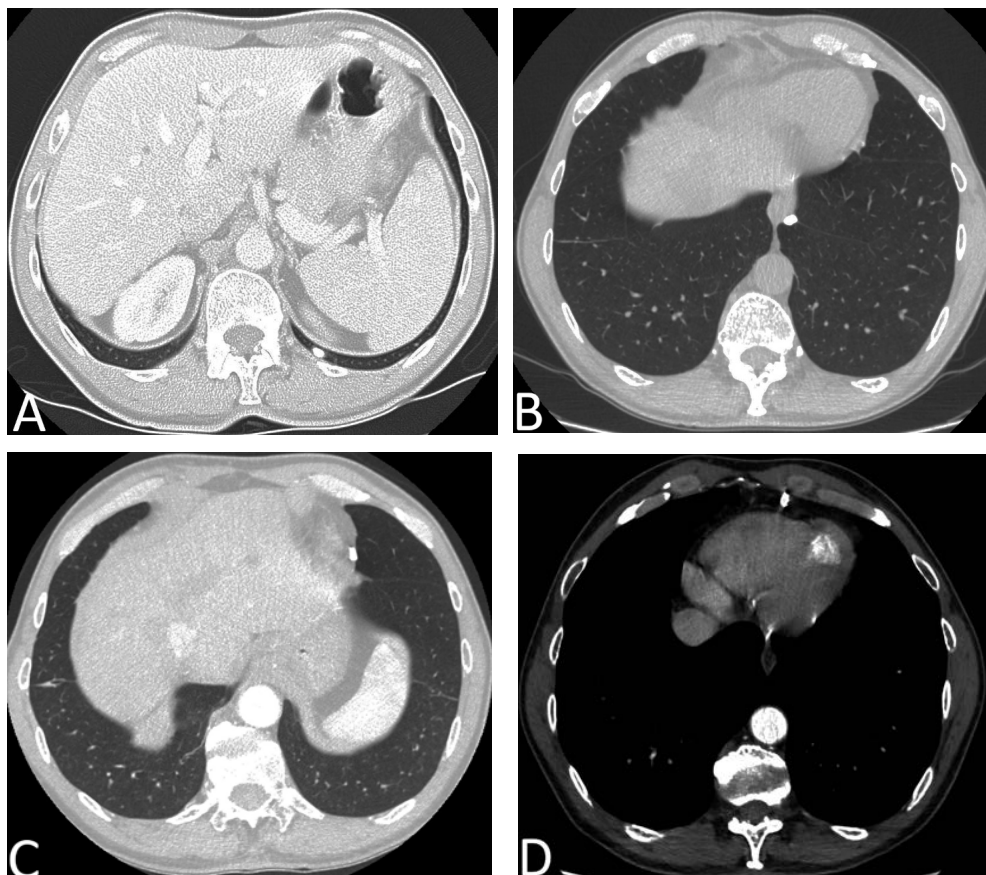
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FIGURES



**Figure 1:** Axial T1-weighted fat-suppressed post-contrast image shows an enhancing mass in the anteromedial left thigh centered in the subcutaneous fat overlying the rectus femoris and sartorius muscles. Note the fiducial marker overlying the mass.



**Figure 2:** Axial chest CT images (A through C – lung windows and D – mediastinal window) over 18 years of follow-up show an approximately 8 mm thoracolith initially located at the posterior aspect of the left lower lobe/costophrenic sulcus (A) and subsequently migrating to the left posterior aspect of the distal esophagus (B), along the left heart (C), and along the anterior aspect of the heart (D) indicating mobility and diagnostic of a thoracolith, rather than osteosarcoma metastasis.

**KEYWORDS**

Thoracolith; Pulmonary; Metastasis; Osteosarcoma;  
Granuloma

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