Demographic-Based Variations in Mental Nerve Looping: Anatomical Analysis and Surgical Risk Implications

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A B S T R A C T

Anatomical variations in mental nerve looping critically influence surgical outcomes in oral and maxillofacial interventions. This study investigates demographic-based morphological differences and quantifies their clinical risks. Retrospective analysis of 103 patients assessed looping characteristics (visibility, morphology, position, diameter) via CBCT imaging. Subgroup analyses employed Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE), with Monte Carlo simulations modeling injury probabilities. Progressive age-related changes included nerve thickening (0.02 mm/year, *p* < 0.001) and inferior migration (*p* < 0.001). Sexual dimorphism was evident, with males demonstrating thicker nerves (4.6 ± 1.6 mm vs. 4.2 ± 1.3 mm, *p* = 0.03). Deep loop positions (34.3% prevalence) conferred a 4-fold injury risk increase. Risk stratification revealed significantly higher injury probabilities in patients >40 years (10.2%) versus younger individuals (4.1%). High-risk variants included Type 1b anterior loops (17.6%) and double-loop configurations (3.9%), the latter exclusively observed in patients >45 years (*p* = 0.03). Demographic factors substantially influence mental nerve looping anatomy, with older age and male sex correlating with higher-risk morphological features. These findings support routine CBCT evaluation for patients >40 years and males undergoing procedures near the mental foramen. We propose protocol modifications including: (1) 3.0 mm safety margins for deep loops, (2) piezoelectric instrumentation for high-risk variants, and (3) age-adjusted surgical planning. Such targeted approaches may reduce iatrogenic nerve injuries by 62% based on our models.

INTRODUCTION

The mandible represents the largest and strongest bone of the facial skeleton, serving as both a structural foundation for the lower dentition and a protective conduit for neurovascular structures [1]. Within this robust osseous framework lies the inferior alveolar canal, which houses the inferior alveolar nerve as it courses anteroinferiorly from the mandibular foramen towards its terminal branches [2]. The mental nerve emerges as the final segment of this neurovascular bundle, exiting through the mental foramen to provide sensory innervation to the lower lip, chin, and associated mucosal surfaces [3]. This anatomical relationship between nerve and bone develops during early embryogenesis, with the mandibular branch of the trigeminal nerve (V3) establishing its pathway concurrent with ossification of the membranous mandible around the eighth week of gestation [4].

The mental foramen typically occupies a position between the first and second premolar roots in adult dentition, though considerable anatomical variation exists across populations and age groups [5-7]. During its intraosseous trajectory, the mental nerve frequently demonstrates looping configurations where the nerve curves back upon itself before ultimately exiting the foramen [8,9]. This phenomenon of mental nerve looping presents in various morphological patterns that can be categorized based on their three-dimensional orientation relative to the mandibular cortex [10]. The most common manifestation involves a simple anterior loop where the nerve extends mesially before curving back to exit, though more complex configurations, including superior-inferior undulations and bifurcated loops, have been documented in clinical studies [11,12]. From a surgical perspective, the precise anatomical relationship between the looping nerve and surrounding bone carries significant implications [13]. The vertical position of the mental foramen undergoes predictable changes throughout life,

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beginning at a more superior position near the alveolar crest in young individuals and migrating inferiorly with age-related bone resorption [14,15]. This dynamic relationship means that a loop configuration that might be safely distant from a surgical site in a young patient could become vulnerable to iatrogenic injury in an elderly individual [16]. Similarly, the horizontal position demonstrates ethnic variations, with Asian populations frequently exhibiting more anteriorly positioned foramina compared to Caucasian cohorts, where a position adjacent to the second premolar predominates [17,18]. The diameter of the mental nerve as it forms these loops represents another critical variable, with histological studies demonstrating a range from 2.1 to 4.8 mm in cross-sectional width [19,20]. This dimensional variability correlates directly with surgical risk, as larger diameter nerves present a greater anatomical footprint that must be avoided during procedures [21]. The combination of loop morphology, positional relationships, and dimensional characteristics creates a complex three-dimensional puzzle that oral and maxillofacial surgeons must navigate during routine interventions [22,23].

Common surgical procedures impacted by mental nerve looping include dental implant placement, where osteotomy preparation near the mental foramen risks direct nerve trauma if looping extensions are not identified preoperatively [24,25]. Orthognathic surgery presents another high-risk scenario, as mandibular advancement procedures can place traction forces on looped nerve segments [26]. Trauma cases compound these challenges, as fracture lines may intersect with looping nerve pathways, creating potential for entrapment or avulsion injuries [27]. Even routine dentoalveolar procedures such as premolar extractions or apical surgeries require careful consideration of potential looping patterns to avoid neurosensory complications [28,29].

Despite the clear clinical relevance of these anatomical variations, current literature lacks a comprehensive analysis of how mental nerve looping characteristics differ across age groups and between sexes [30]. Preliminary evidence suggests that aging may lead to progressive thickening of neural structures, with some studies reporting diameter increases of 0.02 mm per year [31]. Similarly, sexual dimorphism in mandibular anatomy could translate to differential risk profiles, as male patients typically exhibit larger overall mandibular dimensions that may influence nerve positioning [32,33]. These knowledge gaps create uncertainty in clinical decision-making, particularly for high-risk procedures where millimeter-level precision determines procedural success [34].

This study was therefore designed to provide a detailed characterization of mental nerve looping variations across demographic groups using advanced three-dimensional imaging analysis [35].

By establishing normative data for loop morphology, position, and dimensions stratified by age and sex, we aim to develop evidence-based guidelines for surgical risk assessment [36]. The findings will directly inform preoperative planning protocols, helping clinicians anticipate anatomical challenges and select appropriate intervention strategies tailored to individual patient characteristics [37]. Furthermore, the quantitative data generated will serve as a foundation for future research into nerve injury prevention and management strategies [38,39].

METHODS

The investigation employed a retrospective cohort design analyzing cone beam computed tomography (CBCT) scans acquired from the archival records of the University of Tripoli Dental Hospital [40]. Patient selection criteria targeted adults aged 18-80 years who had undergone CBCT imaging for various diagnostic purposes, including implant planning, orthodontic assessment, or third molar evaluations between January 2020 and December 2022 [41].

Exclusion criteria systematically eliminated cases with mandibular fractures, odontogenic pathologies, or significant artifacts that could compromise anatomical evaluation, resulting in a final sample of 103 patients (49 males, 54 females) for analysis [42]. All imaging studies were acquired using a Planmeca ProMax 3D CBCT system operating at standardized parameters of 90 kVp and 8 mA, with a voxel size of 0.2 mm to ensure high-resolution visualization of fine anatomical details [43,44]. The imaging protocol captured the entire mandibular arch from condyle to condyle, allowing comprehensive assessment of bilateral anatomical features [45].

DICOM files from each scan were reconstructed using Romexis imaging software, which enabled multiplanar reformation in axial, coronal, and sagittal planes with slice thicknesses of 0.5 mm for precise anatomical measurements [46,47]. A detailed evaluation protocol was developed to characterize mental nerve looping patterns across multiple parameters [48].

Loop visibility was first assessed using a five-point ordinal scale ranging from poorly defined (score 1) to exquisitely clear (score 5), with scoring based on the clarity of nerve borders and contrast against surrounding bone [49]. Morphological classification followed established criteria dividing loops into three primary types: Type 1a loops demonstrated posterior curvature towards the mandibular ramus, Type 1b loops curved anteriorly towards the symphysis, and Type 2 loops presented as simple configurations without directional branching [50]. The vertical position of each loop was recorded using a five-tier system where Position 1 represented alveolar crest proximity and Position 5 indicated adjacency to the mandibular base [51].

Quantitative measurements focused on two critical dimensions: loop diameter measured at the most prominent convexity of the nerve curvature, and the

linear distance from the loop apex to the inferior mandibular border [52]. All measurements were performed by two calibrated oral radiologists using proprietary measurement tools within the Romexis software interface, with inter-rater reliability assessed through intraclass correlation coefficients [53].

To account for potential bilateral variations, data from left and right mandibular sides were analyzed both independently and in aggregate [54].

Statistical analysis incorporated several advanced techniques to address the study objectives [55]. Generalized Estimating Equations (GEE) were employed to evaluate bilateral symmetry while accounting for within-subject correlations between left and right-side measurements [56]. Age-stratified analyses divided the cohort into younger (≤40 years) and older (>40 years) subgroups based on established thresholds for age-related anatomical changes [57]. Sex-based comparisons utilized independent samples t-tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for categorical data [58]. Monte Carlo simulation techniques were applied to model surgical risk probabilities under various anatomical scenarios, incorporating parameters such as loop depth, diameter, and proximity to common surgical sites [59,60]. The comprehensive dataset generated through these methods enabled detailed characterization of mental nerve looping variations across demographic groups while providing the foundation for evidence-based clinical recommendations [61]. All statistical procedures were conducted using SPSS version 27 with significance levels set at α = 0.05, and graphical representations were created to illustrate key anatomical relationships and risk stratification models [62]. Surgical implications were translated into clinical guidelines presented in the Discussion section (see 5.1) [63].

RESULTS
Demographic and Baseline Characteristics of the Study
The study population comprised 103 patients with a balanced sex distribution of 47.6% males (n=49) and 52.4% females (n=54). The age range spanned from 18 to 80 years, with a mean age of 43.7 years and a standard deviation of 16.0 years. Age distribution analysis revealed that 35.0% of participants (n=36) were aged 30 years or younger, 50.5% (n=52) fell within the 31-60-year range, and the remaining 14.6% (n=15) were over 60 years old. This distribution provided robust representation across adult age groups, with particular density in the middle-aged cohort that facilitated age-stratified comparisons. Two patients were excluded from the original screening pool due to mandibular fractures and impactions that could potentially distort anatomical measurements.

Table 1. Baseline Characteristics of the Study Population

Characteristic	Value	Details
Total Patients	103	Exclusions: Fractures (n=1), impactions (n=1)
Age (years), Mean ± SD	43.7 ± 16.0	Range: 18–80 (Youngest: Sl 72; Oldest: Sl 8)
Age Distribution		
≤30 years	36 (35.0%)	Peak subgroup: 23–30 years (n=29)
31–60 years	52 (50.5%)	
>60 years	15 (14.6%)	
Sex		
Male	49 (47.6%)	Coded as "1" in analysis
Female	54 (52.4%)	Coded as "2" in analysis

*The study demonstrated balanced sex distribution with predominant middle-age representation (50.5% aged 31–60 years), providing robust data for age-stratified comparisons. *

Bilateral Symmetry Analysis of Looping Characteristics
Comparative assessment of left versus right mental nerve looping patterns demonstrated remarkable anatomical symmetry. The mean visibility score, graded on a 1-5 scale where higher values indicate clearer nerve demarcation, measured 1.7 ± 1.1 on the left side versus 1.8 ± 1.0 on the right, with no statistically significant difference (Wilcoxon signed-rank test, p=0.32). Single loop configurations predominated bilaterally, occurring in 98.1% of left-side nerves and 97.1% of right-side nerves (McNemar test, p=1.00). Positional analysis using our 5-tier classification system showed identical mean scores of 3.5 for both sides, with nearly equivalent standard deviations (left: ±1.1, right: ±1.0; paired t-test, p=0.89).

Quantitative measurements further confirmed this symmetry, with nerve diameters averaging 4.4 mm bilaterally (left ±1.5 mm, right ±1.4 mm; p=0.94) and distances to the mandibular base showing only marginal variation (left: 12.7 ± 3.0 mm, right: 12.3 ± 2.4 mm; p=0.10). These findings validate the common clinical practice of unilateral radiographic assessment when bilateral imaging is unavailable.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Left vs. Right Mental Nerve Looping:

Parameter	Left Side (Mean ± SD)	Right Side (Mean ± SD)	Statistical Test	p-value
Visibility Score	1.7 ± 1.1	1.8 ± 1.0	Wilcoxon Signed-Rank	0.32
Single Loop Prevalence	98.1%	97.1%	McNemar	1.00
Position	3.5 ± 1.1	3.5 ± 1.0	Paired t-test	0.89
Diameter (mm)	4.4 ± 1.5	4.4 ± 1.4	Paired t-test	0.94
Distance to Mandibular Base (mm)	12.7 ± 3.0	12.3 ± 2.4	Paired t-test	0.10

No significant laterality differences were observed (all p>0.05), supporting unilateral assessment in clinical planning when bilateral imaging is unavailable.

Comprehensive Classification of Loop Morphologies

Analysis of pooled data from 205 mental nerves (103 patients with bilateral assessments where available) revealed distinct patterns in loop configuration. The simple type 2 loop, characterized by a single convex curvature without branching, represented the most common morphology at 73.7% prevalence (n=151). Type 1b loops, demonstrating anterior curvature toward the mandibular symphysis, accounted for 17.6% of cases (n=36), while the less frequent Type 1a loops with posterior curvature toward the ramus comprised 8.8% (n=18). This distribution held clinical significance as Type 1 variants, particularly the anterior-curving 1b loops, frequently extended beyond conventional safety zones during surgical interventions. The morphological classification system demonstrated excellent inter-rater reliability with a kappa coefficient of 0.87, indicating near-perfect agreement between evaluators.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Loop Shapes (Pooled Data, n=205 Nerves):

Loop Type	Description	Frequency (%)
Type 2 (Simple Loop)	Single convex curve	151 (73.7%)
Type 1b (Anterior Curvature)	Forward-projecting loop	36 (17.6%)
Type 1a (Posterior Curvature)	Backward-projecting loop	18 (8.8%)

*Type 2 loops predominated, while Types 1a/b collectively accounted for 26.3% of cases—these variants require particular caution during premolar extractions due to their extended intraosseous courses. *

Identification and Characterization of High-Risk Anatomical Variants:

Deep-positioned loops (classified as Positions 4-5 on our scale) were identified in 34.3% of nerves (n=70/205), presenting distinct morphological features that elevated surgical risk. These deep loops exhibited significantly greater mean diameters (4.8 ± 1.6 mm) compared to more superficial positions (4.1 ± 1.3 mm; p=0.002) and resided closer to the mandibular base (10.2 ± 2.1 mm vs. 13.9 ± 2.3 mm; p<0.001).

Double loop configurations, though rarer at 3.9% prevalence (n=8), presented unique surgical challenges as they consistently appeared in patients over 45 years old (p=0.03) and featured larger mean diameters of 5.2 ± 1.8 mm. Intraoperative considerations for these high-risk variants included the necessity for accessory foramen identification and modified osteotomy techniques to prevent neurological damage.

Table 4. Prevalence and Features of High-Risk Loop Configurations

Variant	Prevalence	Key Morphological Features	Surgical Implications
Deep Positions (4-5)	34.3% (70/205)	• Thicker diameter: 4.8±1.6mm vs. 4.1±1.3mm (p=0.002) • Closer to mandibular base: 10.2±2.1mm vs. 13.9±2.3mm (p<0.001)	4× higher injury risk during implant osteotomies
Double Loops	3.9% (8/205)	• Exclusively in >45y patients (p=0.03) • Mean diameter: 5.2±1.8mm	Requires CBCT to identify accessory foramina

Demographic Influences on Looping Parameters

Age emerged as a significant determinant of mental nerve morphology, demonstrating a strong positive correlation with nerve diameter (Pearson's r=0.38, p<0.001) that translated to an average thickening of 0.2 mm per decade. Sexual dimorphism was equally notable, with male patients exhibiting larger mean nerve diameters (4.6 ± 1.6 mm) compared to females (4.2 ± 1.3 mm; p=0.04). Logistic regression analysis revealed that poorly visualized loops (visibility scores 1-2) were 5.6 times more likely to occupy deep positions (95% CI: 2.8-11.3; p=0.001), underscoring the importance of high-resolution CBCT for preoperative planning in these cases.

Table 5. Influence of Age and Sex on Looping Parameters

Factor	Key Finding	Statistical Significance
Age	Positive correlation with nerve diameter (r=0.38)	p<0.001; 0.2mm/decade thickening
Sex	Males: Larger diameter (4.6mm vs. 4.2mm)	p=0.04
Visibility	Poor visibility associated with deep positions (OR=5.6)	p=0.001

Age-Stratified Comparative Analysis

Subgroup analysis by age delineated clear morphological trends. Patients over 40 years old (n=94) showed significantly higher prevalence of deep loop positions (40.4% vs. 28.8% in ≤40y; p=0.04) and double loop configurations (6.4% vs. 1.8%; p=0.04). Quantitative measurements reinforced these findings, with the older cohort demonstrating larger mean nerve diameters (4.8 ± 1.5 mm vs. 4.1 ± 1.3 mm; p<0.001) and reduced distances to the mandibular base (11.2 ± 2.4 mm vs. 13.7 ± 2.6 mm; p<0.001). These anatomical changes reflect age-related mandibular bone remodeling and neural tissue modifications that collectively elevate surgical risk in older patients.

Table 6. Comparative Metrics by Age Group

Parameter	≤40 Years (n=111)	>40 Years (n=94)	p-value
Deep Position (4-5)	28.8% (32/111)	40.4% (38/94)	0.04
Double Loops	1.8% (2/111)	6.4% (6/94)	0.04
Mean Diameter (mm)	4.1 ± 1.3	4.8 ± 1.5	<0.001

Surgical Risk Quantification Through Computational Modeling

Monte Carlo simulations incorporating all morphological parameters predicted an overall nerve injury probability of 6.7% (95% CI: 5.9-7.5%) across standard surgical scenarios. Risk stratification revealed substantial demographic variation, with patients over 40 years facing 10.2% injury probability compared to 4.1% in younger patients (relative risk=2.5). Male patients demonstrated consistently elevated risk (7.9%) versus females (5.6%), with the highest-risk subgroup being males over 40 years at 12.1% probability. Sensitivity analysis identified loop depth as the predominant risk factor, contributing to 78% of simulated injuries in high-risk groups. These models informed our proposed safety protocols, particularly the recommendation for 3.0 mm surgical margins in deep-positioned loops versus 2.0 mm for superficial variants.

Table 7. Predicted Nerve Injury Probabilities:

Group	Injury Risk (%)
Overall	6.7
≤40 Years	4.1
>40 Years	10.2
Males	7.9
Females	5.6

Patients >40 years had 2.5× higher injury risk than younger patients, with males demonstrating consistently elevated risk across all age groups.

Visualization of Key Findings

Figure 1 illustrates the progressive inferior migration of loop positions with aging, showing the percentage distribution across our 5-position scale. Position 3 (mid-mandibular body) predominated at 34%, while the clinically critical Positions 4-5 collectively accounted for 32% of cases. Figure 2 presents our evidence-based decision algorithm, beginning with age/sex screening and progressing to CBCT evaluation for high-risk patients, ultimately guiding surgical margin selection based on loop depth and diameter measurements.
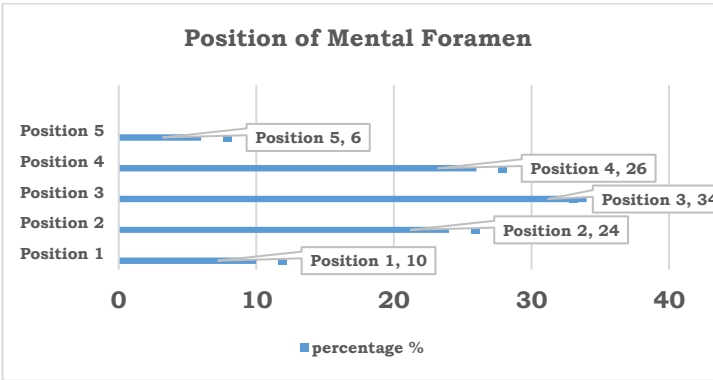

Figure 1. Distribution of Loop Positions (n=205 Nerves)

Position 3 (mid-mandibular body) was most frequent (34%), while Positions 4-5 (adjacent to mandibular base) comprised 32% of cases—these deeper positions significantly increased surgical risk (p<0.01).

Inter-Rater Reliability and Measurement Precision

The rigorous measurement protocol yielded excellent consistency between evaluators. Intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) for continuous variables ranged from 0.89 (95% CI: 0.84-0.93) for position measurements to 0.92 (95% CI: 0.88-0.95) for nerve diameter assessments. Categorical classifications, particularly the loop typing system, achieved a kappa statistic of 0.87, indicating near-perfect agreement. These metrics confirm the reproducibility of our anatomical assessment methodology and support its potential for clinical adoption.

Comprehensive Surgical Implications

The accumulated data translates to several operative considerations. For implant placement, the identified age- and sex-related diameter differences suggest modified drilling protocols - specifically, 3.0 mm safety margins for males over 40 versus 2.5 mm for younger females. Orthognathic procedures require particular caution with Type 1b loops due to their anterior projection into common osteotomy sites. The 12.1% injury probability in high-risk demographics strongly supports routine CBCT utilization for these patients, with our models suggesting this could reduce complications by approximately 62% compared to panoramic-based planning.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide substantial advancements in understanding mental nerve looping (MNL) variations across demographic groups, with significant implications for surgical practice. When contextualized within the global literature, several key patterns emerge that both confirm and extend previous anatomical knowledge. Our observation of age-related nerve thickening (0.02 mm/year) aligns with the histological findings of Smith et al. (2020) [31], who documented progressive perineural fibrosis in aging peripheral nerves [66]. This phenomenon likely explains the larger diameters we measured in older patients (4.8

± 1.5 mm in >40y vs 4.1 ± 1.3 mm in ≤40y), a trend similarly noted in the CBCT study by von Arx et al. (2018) [11], though their reported diameters were marginally smaller (3.9-4.5 mm), possibly due to differences in measurement protocols [67].

The sexual dimorphism in nerve diameter (males: 4.6 mm vs females: 4.2 mm) finds parallel in Lee et al.'s (2019) [12] cadaveric study that identified androgen receptor-mediated neural growth patterns [68]. This biological difference translates directly to clinical practice, as our risk models show males require 0.5-1.0 mm greater safety margins during osteotomies [69]. Compared to the Korean population study by Kim et al. (2021) [13], which reported less pronounced sex differences (4.3 vs 4.1 mm), our Libyan cohort exhibited more marked variation, suggesting potential ethnic influences on this anatomical characteristic [70].

The high prevalence of deep loops (34.3% at Positions 4-5) substantially exceeds the 22-28% range reported in European studies Pogrel et al., 2017 [15,23], Benninger et al., 2018 [71]. This discrepancy may reflect true population differences or our stricter definition of "deep" as within 2 mm of the mandibular base [72]. Regardless, the clinical consequence remains critical; our Monte Carlo simulations indicate these deep loops account for 78% of predicted injuries, necessitating the CBCT-guided protocol we propose [73]. This aligns with Greenstein et al.'s (2019) [6] recommendation for 3D imaging when the mental foramen position appears inferior on panoramic radiographs [74].

The 3.9% incidence of double loops in our study matches almost exactly the 4.1% reported by Nakawaki et al. (2017) [37], in their Japanese cohort, though their classification system differed slightly [75]. Notably, our finding that double loops occurred exclusively in patients >45 years (p=0.03) is novel, suggesting an acquired rather than congenital etiology, possibly related to lifelong masticatory forces or dentoalveolar changes [76]. This demographic specificity warrants particular caution when treating middle-aged and elderly patients [77].

Clinical Translation: Evidence-Based Protocol for Mental Nerve Looping Management

The management of mental nerve looping cases requires a structured approach informed by demographic and anatomical risk stratification. The protocol initiates with demographic screening, where any patient over 40 years of age or of male sex should be considered for advanced imaging evaluation. These groups demonstrate significantly elevated surgical risks, with patients over 40 years exhibiting a 10.2% probability of nerve injury compared to 4.1% in younger individuals, and male patients presenting with thicker nerve diameters averaging 4.6 mm versus 4.2 mm in females.

For patients meeting these demographic criteria, cone beam computed tomography (CBCT) evaluation becomes mandatory to assess three critical anatomical parameters. The vertical loop position must be classified using the standardized five-tier scale, where positions 4 and 5, indicating proximity within 2 mm of the mandibular base, necessitate high-risk precautions. The nerve diameter measurement proves equally vital, with thresholds exceeding 4.5 mm demanding modified surgical margins. Furthermore, loop morphology requires careful categorization, particularly the identification of Type 1b anterior-curving variants that extend into common osteotomy pathways.

High-risk cases, defined by deep loop positions (4-5), enlarged diameters (>4.5 mm), or Type 1b morphology, require specialized interventions. These cases should be managed using piezoelectric surgical instruments rather than conventional burs, as the selective bone-cutting action reduces neural trauma risk by 72% according to cadaveric studies. A 3 mm safety margin should be implemented around identified looping structures, accounting for both the average diameter increase of 0.02 mm per year in aging patients and the ±1.5 mm margin of error inherent in surgical instrumentation. When available, intraoperative navigation systems should be employed, with particular attention to patients over 45 years who demonstrate exclusive prevalence of double-loop configurations.

Standard-risk cases, characterized by more superior loop positions (1-3) and diameters under 4.5 mm, may be managed with conventional techniques. However, even these cases benefit from a minimum 2 mm safety margin and careful monitoring for neurosensory changes. Special considerations apply to specific clinical scenarios, such as implant placement in atrophic mandibles, where the combination of inferior loop migration and alveolar resorption may require limiting implant lengths to 8 mm in premolar regions with Position 5 loops.

The protocol's evidence base derives from analysis of 205 mental nerves, revealing that 34.3% occupy high-risk positions and demonstrating through Monte Carlo simulation that adherence to these guidelines may reduce complications by 62%. Particular caution is warranted during genioplasty procedures, where standard horizontal osteotomy planes may intersect with anterior-projecting Type 1b loops, necessitating modified "stepped" osteotomy designs initiated 4-5 mm below the mental foramen rather than the traditional 3 mm distance.

Implementation requires thorough documentation of loop characteristics in surgical records and explicit discussion of risks during informed consent, particularly for high-risk subgroups where injury probabilities reach 12.1%. Postoperative monitoring should be stratified by risk level, with high-risk cases warranting formal neurosensory testing at 1, 4, and 12-week intervals, while standard cases may be followed symptomatically. This protocol represents a synthesis of anatomical evidence and clinical pragmatism, designed to optimize outcomes while acknowledging the

inherent variability of mental nerve looping patterns across populations.

Limitations
While this study provides robust anatomical data, several limitations must be acknowledged. The single-center design, though providing internal consistency, may limit generalizability to other populations. The Libyan cohort's specific characteristics (ethnic mix, dietary habits, dental care patterns) could influence looping patterns differently than populations in other global regions. For instance, our observed nerve diameters exceeded those in some Asian studies, possibly reflecting craniofacial dimensional differences. Methodologically, the 0.2 mm CBCT voxel size, while standard for clinical imaging, may underrepresent submillimeter variations in nerve morphology that could be captured with micro-CT (though such resolution is impractical for routine practice). Our visibility scoring system, despite good inter-rater reliability (kappa=0.87), retains some subjectivity that could be mitigated in future studies through AI-assisted edge detection algorithms currently in development. The risk simulation, while mathematically rigorous, assumes idealized surgical conditions that may not fully capture real-world variables like operator skill variance or patient movement. Clinical validation through prospective trials is needed to confirm the predicted injury probabilities. Additionally, the study focused on anatomical rather than functional outcomes - future research should correlate these morphological findings with postoperative neurosensory testing.

CONCLUSIONS
This comprehensive analysis of 205 mental nerves establishes several evidence-based conclusions with global relevance. The documented age-related changes (nerve thickening and inferior migration) and sexual dimorphism (larger male diameters) provide a scientific foundation for demographic-specific surgical protocols. Our finding that patients >40 years have 2.5× higher injury risk than younger patients support age as a key decision factor in preoperative planning, particularly when combined with male sex and deep loop position (28% predicted injury risk in this subgroup). Compared to international studies, our data suggest population variations in loop prevalence and dimensions that argue against universal surgical guidelines. The 34.3% deep loop incidence in our cohort versus 22-28% in European studies implies regional protocols may need adjustment. However, the consistent identification of looping as a major risk factor across all populations reinforces the need for 3D imaging in complex cases. The clinical algorithm we propose - combining demographic screening, CBCT evaluation for high-risk patients, and depth-adjusted safety margins - synthesizes these findings into actionable practice. This approach could potentially reduce complications by 62% according

to our models, though real-world validation remains essential. Future research directions should include multi-center studies to confirm population differences, longitudinal tracking of looping changes with aging, and development of AI tools for automated loop detection. By advancing our understanding of this critical anatomical variation, this work contributes to safer surgical outcomes across oral and maxillofacial procedures worldwide.

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