Oral Acanthosis Nigricans: Case Report and Comparison with Literature Reports

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Received: March 14, 2008
Accepted: April 30, 2008

SUMMARY Acanthosis nigricans (AN) is a rare condition which may affect oral cavity. There are two forms of AN: benign and malignant. Benign AN may be hereditary, or may be related to systemic diseases or drugs. Malignant AN is most often associated with gastric adenocarcinoma but cancers of other sites and types may also occur. This case report is based on a case of a 78-year-old woman suffering from invasive bladder papillary transitional cell carcinoma accompanied by extensive papillomatous areas of normal mucosal color and soft consistency involving the lips, buccal mucosa and hard palate. Verrucous changes with tiny pigmented macules were also found on the skin of the right ear auricle. Oral lesions occurred after the tumor had been diagnosed, i.e. after third operation for tumor recurrence. The fifth operation for tumor recurrence resulted in slight improvement of oral changes. It is concluded that the severity of oral changes is in correlation with tumor progression. The occurrence of oral lesions may be an indicator of tumor progression.

KEY WORDS: acanthosis nigricans, cancer, oral cavity

INTRODUCTION

Acanthosis nigricans (AN) is a mucocutaneous disorder which is characterized by the presence of hyperpigmented papillary lesions on the skin and papillomatous lesions in the oral cavity (1). There are two forms of AN, benign and malignant. Benign AN may be hereditary, or may be related to systemic diseases such as diabetes, obesity, Cushing’s syndrome or Addison’s disease. Certain drugs such as nicotinic acid, systemic corticosteroids, estrogens, insulin and fusidic acid may play a role as well (1). Insulin-resistant diabetes and hyperinsulinemia are the most common conditions associated with the benign form of AN. Malignant AN is a rare condition that is always associated with neoplasms. Searching through the Medline we found 8 cases of oral AN described from 1999 to 2007 (2-9).

Adenocarcinomas are the most common malignancies found in patients with malignant AN (10). Malignant AN is most often associated with gastric adenocarcinoma but cancers of other sites and types may also occur (1).
The pathogenesis of malignant AN remains unclear. A current hypothetical mechanism is the secretion of large amounts of transforming growth factor \( \alpha \) (TGF-\( \alpha \)) by the tumor into the circulation, which is thought to stimulate keratinocyte growth via an endocrine route (11). AN is characterized by hyperpigmented plaques commonly affecting the axillae, nape and sides of the neck. Pruritus and hyperkeratosis of the palms and soles have also been reported (2). Oral AN is characterized by extensive papillomatosis of the lips, palate, gingiva and tongue (3). Histologic analysis shows hyperkeratosis and irregular acanthosis, but no hyperpigmentation (2). Papillary hyperplasia of the epithelial lamina is also present (2-4,7,8). This report is based on a case of a patient suffering from oral AN and diagnosed with advanced invasive bladder papillary transitional cell carcinoma.

**CASE REPORT**

In September 2006, a 78-year-old woman was referred to the Department of Oral Medicine, School of Dental Medicine, University of Zagreb, Croatia, for evaluation of papillomatous lesions of the vestibular and buccal oral mucosa, lips and skin. Her medical history included diabetes mellitus and hypercholesterinemia as well as taking oral antidiabetics and antilipemic drugs. Two and a half years before oral lesions developed, the diagnosis of invasive papillary transitional cell carcinoma of the right bladder had been established. Due to the tumor recurrence, the patient was surgically treated four times within 2 years. The patient refused to undergo the indicated radiotherapy, and chemotherapy was not performed. Between the third and the fourth operation, she started to notice discomfort in the oral cavity. Shortly afterwards, due to developed changes on the oral mucosa, the patient was referred to a maxillofacial surgeon who took biopsies from the lower lip and hard palate.

Histologic analyses showed fibrovascular papillomatous connective tissue covered by hyperkeratotic epithelium. These findings were consistent with the diagnoses of papilloma and fibroepithelial polyp.

Clinical examination at our Department revealed extensive papillomatous areas of normal mucosal color and soft consistency involving the lips (Fig. 1a), buccal mucosa (Fig. 1b) and hard palate. Verrucous changes with tiny pigmented macules were also present on the skin of the right ear auricle. The diagnosis of AN was established according to clinical and histologic findings and the patient’s medical documentation.

The patient refused another biopsy due to general weakness. A swab for *Candida albicans* culture and cytobrush smear for human papilloma virus (HPV) detection were obtained from papillomatous lesions. *Candida albicans* was highly positive by semiquantitative evaluation according to the previously published Budz-Jörgensen’s criteria (12). We prescribed two-week therapy with miconazole 2% oral gel. HPV DNA was not detected by using the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) technique on the cytobrush smear from papillomatous lesions. Isotretinoin (0.5%) in Orabase was prescribed for local therapy for its antiproliferative effect. The patient noticed slight improvement of oral lesions.

**Figure 1.a** Papillomatous changes of the lips.

**Figure 1.b** Papillomatous changes of the buccal mucosa.
By the end of 2006, the patient underwent her fifth operation for tumor recurrence. Following the surgery, oral lesions decreased (Fig. 2); however, in May 2007 the patient died from tumor recurrence and general weakness.

**DISCUSSION**

In this case report, a malignant form of AN appearing on the oral mucosa, perioral skin and skin of the right ear associated with advanced invasive bladder papillary transitional cell carcinoma is described. In previous reports, malignant AN has been most commonly associated with gastric adenocarcinoma (6-7,9,13-18). Carcinomas of the pancreas and biliary tract were also found (2,4,5). Other carcinomas such as those of the esophagus, bladder, testes, breast, uterus and lungs have been reported with less frequency. In the report by Cairo et al. (3), AN was associated with lung and bladder carcinoma in the same patient. As the latter was at an early stage, confined to the superficial bladder epithelium, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the occurrence of malignant AN was more likely linked to lung carcinoma. Additional evidence may be the fact that AN progressed despite surgical eradication of the bladder tumor (3). Bottoni et al. (8) also report on malignant AN associated with lung carcinoma.

AN may involve any part of oral mucosa and extend to pharyngeal and esophageal mucous membranes (3). In previous reports, there has been only one case report describing malignant AN limited to buccal mucosa (19). Unlike skin lesions, oral AN seems to be rarely pigmented or not pigmented at all (1,2).

Approximately 40% of malignant AN showed oral lesions (20). During the 1968-1998 period, there were 14 cases of malignant AN involving oral cavity, as reported by Ramirez-Amador et al. (2). Eight cases of malignant AN involving oral cavity published by Medline from 1999 to 2007 are shown in Table 1. Although the number of described cases in comparison with the number of cases reported by Ramirez-Amador et al. (2) has increased, gastric adenocarcinomas is still the most common associated malignancy (Table 2). Our assumption is that the discrepancy in the number of cases described in our report and those included in Ramirez’s report is more likely to be due to the fact that we had an easier access to Internet browsing and literature data than to the actual increased prevalence of the disorder. According to our report (Table 1), in seven of eight cases malignancy was diagnosed after AN had developed. These data show the importance of the correct diagnosis of oral and cutaneous manifestations of AN and additional diagnostic procedures in the detection of internal malignancy. It has been recommended that patients with a clinical picture of AN, apart from routine hematological and biochemical analyses, should undergo chest x-ray, mammography, cervical cytology, prostate-specific antigen assay and possibly endoscopy of the complete gastrointestinal tract (4). Kleikamp et al. (6) found increased levels of the tumor markers CA 19-9, CA 72-4 and CEA in serum of a patient with malignant AN.

Histological analysis of the previous reports on AN in the oral cavity showed hyperkeratosis, acanthosis and finger-like structures of epithelial lamina (2-4). These histological findings correspond well to the histological data in our case.

In our patient, PCR typing of HPV showed no reactivity for HPV. In the study by Ramirez-Amador et al. (2), PCR typing of HPV showed weak reactivity for HPV type 35. Bottoni et al. (8) found no HPV using PCR technique. Other authors (13,16) found no HPV antigens using immunohistochemistry either. The result of Ramirez-Amador et al. may be considered as an incidental finding (2).

Since the lesions of malignant AN are clinically indistinguishable from the benign forms, this fact addresses the importance and necessity of additional diagnostic procedures in the detection of internal malignancy. In our case, a reduction of oral lesions was observed after operative cancer treatment, which was consistent with previous observations on AN to decrease following chemotherapy administration (5,9). The occurrence of clinical signs and/or aggravation of oral AN may suggest recurrence or metastasis of the primary tumor, as shown in our case.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Year of publication (ref. no.)</th>
<th>Diagnosis of AN (before/after diagnosis of malignancy)</th>
<th>Oral signs and symptoms</th>
<th>Other signs and symptoms</th>
<th>Associated malignancy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ramirez-Amador et al.</td>
<td>1999 (2)</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Papillomatosis of upper vermilion and lip mucosa, buccal mucosa, hard and soft palate, gingiva and dorsum of the tongue</td>
<td>Discrete hyperpigmented cutaneous plaques; papillomatous lesions on the esophagus; palm hyperkeratosis</td>
<td>Gallbladder adenocarcinoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anderson et al.</td>
<td>1999 (9)</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Papillomatous lesions on perioral area and palate</td>
<td>Pruritus; generalized warty growths; papillomatous lesions of the eyelids; discharge and pain of perineum; acanthotic areas on the chest wall and nipples</td>
<td>Gastric adenocarcinoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottoni et al.</td>
<td>2000 (8)</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Papillomatous and verrucous lesions on lips and mouth</td>
<td>Diffuse hyperpigmentation; hyperkeratosis of the nipples; papillomatous and verrucous lesions of the conjunctivae</td>
<td>Lung carcinoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scully et al.</td>
<td>2001 (4)</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Mild gingival swelling, diffuse thickening of lower labial mucosa</td>
<td>Generalized pruritic skin papules, of the axillae and groin; slightly keratotic palms and soles</td>
<td>Gallbladder adenocarcinoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairo et al.</td>
<td>2001 (3)</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Papillomatosis of vestibular mucosa, dorsum of the tongue, palate and gingiva; burning sensations</td>
<td>Subtle changes on the neck skin, axillae, internal surface of the tights, with hyperpigmented and thickened areas</td>
<td>Bladder and lung carcinoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentenero et al.</td>
<td>2004 (7)</td>
<td>After</td>
<td>Papillomatosis of lips, buccal mucosa and palate; sore palate</td>
<td>Verrucous, slightly pigmented papules in the axillae and on the dorsal surface of the hand; small, brown hyperkeratotic exophytic lesions on the back</td>
<td>Gastric adenocarcinoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGinness and Greer</td>
<td>2006 (5)</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Verruous papillomatous papules and plaques on the vermilion, buccal mucosa and tongue</td>
<td>Tripe palms</td>
<td>Pancreatic adenocarcinoma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kleikamp et al.</td>
<td>2006 (6)</td>
<td>Before</td>
<td>Papillomatous to verrucous lesions of the lips and buccal mucosa</td>
<td>Hyperkeratosis of the palms and soles</td>
<td>Gastric adenocarcinoma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Comparison of literature data according to the incidence of gastric adenocarcinoma during observation period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author (ref. no.)</th>
<th>Period (yrs)</th>
<th>No. of acanthosis nigricans cases described</th>
<th>Incidence of associated gastric adenocarcinoma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ramirez-Amador et al. (2)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6/14 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canjuga et al.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3/8 (37.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is concluded that the occurrence of oral lesions may be an indicator of tumor progression.

References