Tinea Incognita in a Patient with Crest Syndrome: Case Report

Biljana Gorgievska-Sukarovska¹, Mihael Skerlev², Lidija Žele-Starčević³

¹Dermatology and Venereology Unit, Zabok General Hospital, Zabok, Croatia; ²Department of Dermatology and Venereology, University Hospital Center Zagreb, University of Zagreb, School of Medicine, Reference Laboratory for Dermatological Mycology and Parasitology of the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare of Republic of Croatia, Zagreb, Croatia; ³Department of Clinical and Molecular Microbiology, University Hospital Center Zagreb, University of Zagreb, School of Medicine, Zagreb, Croatia

Corresponding author:
Biljana Gorgievska-Sukarovska, MD
Dermatology and Venereology Unit
Zabok General Hospital
Bračak 8
49000 Zabok
Croatia
biljana.gs@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT Tinea incognita is a dermatophytic infection that is difficult to diagnose, usually modified by inappropriate topical or systemic corticosteroid therapy. We report an extensive case of tinea incognita caused by the zoophilic dermatophyte *Trichophyton mentagrophytes* (var. *granulosa*) in a 49-year-old female patient with CREST (Calcinosis; Raynaud phenomenon; Esophageal involvement; Sclerodactyly; Teleangiectasia) syndrome. Immunosuppressed patients, as well as patients with keratinization disorders, seem to be especially susceptible to dermatophytic infections with atypical clinical presentation that is sometimes bizarre and difficult to recognize. Therefore, close monitoring and mycological skin examination is recommended in order to avoid misdiagnosis and to give the patient the best chance of recovery.

KEY WORDS: Tinea incognita, *Trichophyton mentagrophytes* (var. *granulosa*), CREST

INTRODUCTION

Tinea incognita is a dermatophytic infection that is difficult to diagnose, usually modified by inappropriate topical or systemic corticosteroid therapy. Additionally, cases of tinea incognita induced by topical immunomodulators such as pimecrolimus (1,2) and tacrolimus (3) have been reported recently. Shortly after topical corticosteroids were introduced, the first cases of tinea incognita were described (4). Both immunocompetent and immunocompromised patients can be involved.

The most frequently reported agent in Europe is the anthropophilic dermatophyte *Trichophyton rubrum* (5,6). Zoophilic and even geophilic dermatophytes can also be implicated with tinea incognita (5,7).

We report a case of an extensive tinea incognita caused by the zoophilic dermatophyte *Trichophyton mentagrophytes* (var. *granulosa*) in a patient with CREST (Calcinosis; Raynaud phenomenon; Esophageal involvement; Sclerodactyly; Teleangiectasia) syndrome.

CASE REPORT

A 49-year-old female patient was referred to our Department due to extensive, erythematous, and not well demarcated lesions on the trunk, neck, and arms (Figure 1). Ichthyosiform scales and punctiform excoriations were observed as well. Prior to admission, the lesions had been unsuccessfully treated with topical
Fifteen years earlier, the patient had been diagnosed with CREST syndrome with biliary cirrhosis and had been continuously receiving systemic steroids. Eventually, the maintenance dose became 10 mg of prednisone daily. Apart of the previously described skin lesions, the physical examination also revealed sclerodactyly and calcinosis of the fingers, with yellowish discoloration of the nails (Figure 2). Numerous teleangiectasias were spread over the face, neck, upper trunk, and even the lips (Figure 3).

Direct microscopic potassium hydroxide (KOH) examination of the skin scrapings was positive, revealing fungal hyphae. *Trichophyton mentagrophytes* (var. *granulosa*) was confirmed by culture on the glucose-modified Sabouraud medium. Direct examination and fungal culture of the nails were negative. Topical treatment with terbinafine cream was initiated. Systemic antimycotic therapy was not administered because of the very good response to the topical therapy and due to the high level of liver enzymes. After four weeks of treatment, a complete clinical and mycological regression was observed (Figure 4).

**DISCUSSION**

CREST syndrome is a clinical variant of scleroderma. It is not entirely a benign syndrome since esophageal dysfunction, pulmonary hypertension, and (as in our patient) biliary cirrhosis can occasionally occur (8). Systemic immunosuppressive agents are sometimes used in order to ameliorate morbidity and decrease potential mortality. In our patient, systemic and prolonged immunosuppression and inappropriate topical corticosteroid therapy resulted in extensive pruritic lesions with peculiar clinical appearance. The lesions were erythematous, not well demarcated, with ichthyosiform scaling, and excoriated due to the very intensive pruritus. The most frequently isolated fungus in Europe is anthropophilic dermatophyte *Trichophyton rubrum* (5), whereas in our patient zoophilic *Trichophyton mentagrophytes* (var. *granulosa*) was confirmed by culture. However, no zoophilic source of infection could be detected, so the exact route of infection remained unclear in our patient. The unregistered or disregarded contact with the zoophilic source might have taken place in the patient’s history, and such a clinical presentation might have occurred due to the pre-existing keratinization disorder.
A case of tinea incognita has been also reported in a patient with pemphigus foliaceus on a potent topical and prolonged systemic steroid therapy. The reported lesions were pustular, extensive, and irritable, with less-raised margins and less scaly surface, resembling the basic ones due to the pemphigus foliaceus (9). Unrecognized dermatophyte infections have been furthermore reported in patients with ichthyosis vulgaris and some other disorders of keratinization (10,11). In those disorders, excessive keratin production seems to provide a more favorable habitat for fungi compared with normal skin (12). In patients with lupus erythematosus, fungal infections are also a major cause of morbidity. Disseminated dermatophytic infection due to *Microsporum gypseum* has been described in a patient with systemic lupus erythematosus. Intrinsic immunological defects in lupus erythematosus and prolonged immunosuppressive therapy have been suggested as triggering factors (13).

Immunocompromised patients with HIV/AIDS seem to be especially susceptible to dermatophyte infections. Thus, widespread dermatophyte infections with atypical appearance, resistant to the conventional therapy, have also been reported (7,14,15). Tinea incognita is reported not only in immunocompromised patients, but also in otherwise healthy patients (16,17), including children (18-20). The clinical appearance of such infections can mimic numerous skin diseases, e.g. lupus erythematosus, eczema, rosacea, purpura, seborrheic dermatitis, and lichen planus (5).

**CONCLUSION**

Immunocompromized patients are susceptible to dermatophyte infections with atypical clinical presentation. The clinical appearance is sometimes bizarre and difficult to recognize. Therefore, close monitoring and mycological skin examination is recommended in order to avoid misdiagnosis and to give the patient the best chance of recovery.

**References**