Birt-Hogg-Dubé Syndrome

Synonym: fibrofolliculomas with trichodiscomas and acrochordons

Birt-Hogg-Dubé syndrome is named after the three authors of a paper that described family members with papular skin lesions on their face, forehead, scalp and neck. [1]

When these lesions were examined, the following were found: [2]

- Fibrofolliculomas (benign tumours of the hair follicle).
- Trichodiscomas (hamartomatous tumours of the hair disc).
- Acrochordons ('wart with a thin neck' skin tags).

This triad of features became known as Birt-Hogg-Dubé syndrome. It is now thought that these may all just be part of the spectrum of fibrofolliculomas. [3]

Genetics

- Birt-Hogg-Dubé syndrome is a rare inherited genodermatosis. [2]
- The condition is caused by mutation in the gene encoding folliculin which may have a role as a tumour suppressor gene.
- The mutation is at gene map locus 17p11.2.
- An autosomal dominant inheritance pattern has been identified. [4]

Epidemiology

- The actual incidence is unknown, but it is likely to be underdiagnosed. [5]

Presentation

- Onset tends to be in adulthood with skin lesions: [2]
  - These develop in the 20s or 30s and remain throughout life.
  - They are typically small, dome-shaped, papular skin lesions, about 2 mm to 4 mm in diameter, that develop over the scalp, face, neck and upper trunk. They may also be seen in the mouth.
  - They cause no symptoms and the reason for presentation is usually cosmetic.
  - Acrochordons are warty-like skin tags that may be found on the eyelids, neck, axilla and upper half of the trunk. [3]

  - Presentation may also be with renal carcinoma, spontaneous pneumothorax or other possible associated condition - see below.

Associations

There are a number of conditions associated with Birt-Hogg-Dubé syndrome including: [3]

- Renal carcinomas (may be multifocal or bilateral; most commonly chromophobe renal carcinoma and oncocytic hybrid tumours). [6]
- Pulmonary cysts.
- Spontaneous pneumothorax.

These are thought to result from a mutation in the FLCN gene. The conditions below are other possible associations.

- Connective tissue naevi.
- Parathyroid adenomas.
- Flecked chorioretinopathy.
- Bullous emphysema.
- Lipomas and angiolipomas.
• Parotid oncocytomas.
• Multiple oral mucosal papules.
• Neural tissue tumours.
• Multiple facial angiofibromas.
• Colonic polyps and colonic adenocarcinoma.
• Medullary thyroid carcinoma.

Investigations

Birt-Hogg-Dubé syndrome should be looked for in any patient with multiple bilateral kidney tumours, especially if the predominant histological type is chromophobe renal cell carcinoma or hybrid oncocytic tumour. [7]

• Skin biopsy will confirm the nature of the lesions.
• Molecular genetic testing is available.
• CXR (may show pulmonary cysts, bullous emphysema or pneumothorax).
• Renal ultrasound and CT scan of the abdomen/pelvis should be performed to screen for renal tumours. Relatives should also be screened for renal cancer.
• Consider colonoscopy because of the possible association with colonic polyps/carcinoma, although this is debated. [8, 9]

Management

• There is no specific therapy.
• Skin lesions may be treated by surgical removal. Dermabrasion, electrodesiccation and laser treatment have been used but the lesions may recur. [9]
• There should be long-term follow-up for malignant change, especially renal carcinoma and possibly colonic carcinoma.
• Monitoring and screening for associated chest conditions should be carried out.
• Associated conditions should be managed appropriately.
• Genetic counselling should be offered.

Prognosis

• This depends on the development of associated conditions, especially renal carcinoma.
• The tendency for associated malignancy seems variable between families.
• Specific mutations in the folliculin gene may predispose to cancer development in Birt-Hogg-Dubé syndrome. [10]
• Malignancy is not an invariable part of the disease.

Prevention

• Encourage patients to stop smoking because of the additive risk factor for lung disease and renal carcinoma.
• Avoidance of high ambient pressures may reduce the risk of spontaneous pneumothorax. [11]

Further reading & references

Birt-Hogg-Dubé syndrome; DermNet NZ
BHD Foundation

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