Clinical Observations

Herpes zoster: treatment with cimetidine

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The active phase of herpes zoster can be predicted from the length of time it takes for all the vesicles to erupt. A case is reported in which cimetidine therapy appeared to reduce the expected length of the active phase from 35 days or longer to 10 days.

La phase active de l'infection à herpes zoster peut être prédite à partir du temps que prennent toutes les vésicules pour apparaître. On décrit un cas où la cimétidine semble avoir réduit la durée de la phase active de 35 jours ou plus à 10 jours.

In the active phase of herpes zoster erythematous papules progress to vesicles in 12 to 24 hours and to pustules in 72 hours. The erythema around the pustules subsides, and at 7 to 8 days the pustules begin to dry. In the resolution phase crusts form and in 14 to 21 days fall off, leaving erythematous macular lesions.[1]

The length of the active phase depends on the time it takes for all the vesicles to erupt: if the vesicles all erupt within 24 hours, 48 hours or 7 days, then the active phase lasts from 10 to 12 days, 14 to 16 days or 35 days or longer respectively. However, crusts fall off in a constant amount of time: 14 to 21 days after they have formed.[1]

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Herpes zoster is more severe in patients over 60 years of age.[2] Among 60- to 69-year-old patients with this infection studied by Burgoon and colleagues[1] 48% had an active phase of 10 to 14 days, but in the other 52% the lesions healed slowly; the average total time from the appearance of papules to healing was 67 days in the latter 52%.

We report a case of a 61-year-old man with herpes zoster. From the length of time the vesicles took to erupt, the active phase was expected to last 35 days or longer. However, treatment with cimetidine appeared to accelerate healing.

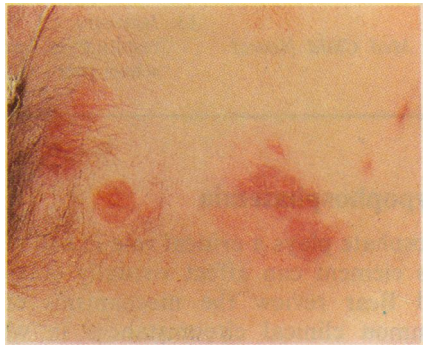

FIG. 1—Seventh day of active phase of herpes zoster before start of cimetidine therapy.

FIG. 2—On 6th day of cimetidine therapy and 13th day since first appearance of papules resolution phase has started at oldest sites of eruption.

Case report

A 61-year-old man was seen in an outpatient clinic for herpes zoster. Vesicles had been appearing for 7 days. There were nine eruption sites, related to the left fifth dermatome, over the chest and back. Three of the sites were less than 48 hours old and were florid. Prominent left axillary lymphadenopathy and inflammation of the left breast were also seen.

Serial photographs were taken to document the effect of treatment (Figs. 1 to 3).

Treatment with cimetidine, 600 mg taken orally every 8 hours, was started on the 7th day of the active phase. After 2½ days of treatment the three newest vesicle sites were

FIG. 3—On 20th day since first appearance of papules scabs cover erythematous ulcer-like lesions that first appeared 3 days earlier and signalled end of infection.

drying, and the erythema was reduced. Amelioration of the tenderness in the left breast and left axilla was noted by the patient. The dose of cimetidine was increased to 900 mg every 12 hours for the last 3½ days of therapy. In addition, zinc sulfate, 200 mg three times a day, was given. After the first dose of the new regimen the pain in the left breast and left axilla resolved, and the erythema in both locations was further reduced. The patient took cimetidine for a total of 8½ days. In the two newest sites the vesicles resolved without the usual crusting and produced no scarring at one site and minimal scarring at the other. However, the oldest site scarred extensively. This difference in scarring suggests that the rapid interruption in the intensity of the infection was due to cimetidine, which shortened and changed the course from the usual pattern. The total time from the appearance of papules to healing was 17 days.

Comments

This case report supports the clinical observation of van der Spuy and associates[3] that cimetidine may be effective against herpesviruses. In our patient vesicles erupted for 7 days, so that slow healing was expected. However, the rate of healing was accelerated in the remainder of the active phase and in the resolution phase while the patient took cimetidine, with a resultant decrease in the usual total course of herpes zoster from the expected 49 days or longer to 17 days. Further studies on the efficacy of cimetidine against herpesviruses need to be performed.

References

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