

A case of plica neuropathica

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Abstract Plica neuropathica is a rare disorder of scalp hair commonly encountered in adult females with few case reports in infants, children and adult male. In most of the cases there is psychological disturbance. Patients present with matted hair, sometimes with foul smell, oozing, scaling, and difficulty in combing hair. It is usually encountered in mentally disturbed, superstitious and religious believed patients. We report a case of plica neuropathica in a 46 year old female associated with frequent rubbing of hair with fingers most probably with underlying psychiatric component.

Key words

Frequent rubbing of hair, Plica neuropathica, psychiatric component.

Introduction

Plica neuropathica is an uncommon acquired disorder of scalp hair, in which patient clinically presents with matted, irregularly twisted and entangled plaits usually in healthy individuals. Earlier plica neuropathica was used to be called plica polonica or Polish plait, as it was prevalent in Poland in the 19th century. In most of the reported cases, the disease is more common in adult females, but there are few case reports in infants,¹ and children.² How exactly the matting of hairs occurs is not well-understood but some external factors that damage hair shaft may play a role, like in wool and textile industries felting of fibers occur due to exposure to surface damage and friction.³ In India it is common in certain religious group like ‘sadhush’ in Hindu religion but it is rare in general population.

Case report

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A 46 years old married woman housewife, presented with matting of scalp hair since one and half months. Initially it started as a small area of matted hair on the left side of the scalp which gradually increased in size to involve almost whole of the scalp hair (**Figure1**). There was no history of itching, oozing, scaling but patient complained occasionally of left sided headache. There was no history of chemical treatment of hair, use of shampoo, or pediculosis in the recent past. Patient used to wash her hair with soap and there was history of difficulty in combing her hair. Her husband revealed that the patient has anger outburst and she keeps on rubbing her hair with fingers. On examination she had elongated mass of matted hairs covering almost whole of the left side of the scalp, along whole length of hair and few discrete masses of matted hair on the right side of the scalp. There was associated greying of hair. The matted hair were without nits, lice, crusts, oozing and scaling. The underlying scalp was normal. General physical, systemic and other mucocutaneous examination was unremarkable. The patient was advised a psychiatric consultation for her behavioural changes. But, she was lost to follow up.



Figure 1 Diffuse matting of hair in plica neuropathica. There is no crusting, nits, oozing or scales associated with the matted hair.

Discussion

The exact cause of plica neuropathica in our patient is not known, but we presumed that continuous rubbing of her hair without any significant symptoms like itching may have caused the condition. Plica neuropathica is commonly associated with psychologically disturbed patient especially in women and they usually have habit of repeated manipulation of the hair.^{4,5} Plica neuropathica has been reported in a patient with schizophrenia.⁶

The pathogenesis of matting of hair is not exactly understood. However, certain major mechanical factors implicated in the pathogenesis of plica neuropathica are: a physical phenomenon of felting,³ electrostatic attraction between hairs, vigorous rubbing, long

hair, severe infestation and pyodermas.^{7,8} Irritant contact dermatitis of the scalp,⁹ use of certain shampoos,⁸ and following azathioprine induced pancytopenia¹⁰ are also associated with plica neuropathica.

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