Secondary Syphilis

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Section Editor: Rick A. McPheeters, DO
Submission history: Submitted June 1, 2020; Revision received July 13, 2020; Accepted July 16, 2020
Electronically published October 20, 2020
Full text available through open access at http://escholarship.org/uc/uciem_cpcem
DOI: 10.5811/cpcem.2020.7.48515

Case Presentation: A 40-year-old male presented to the emergency department (ED) due to a diffuse body rash after a sexual encounter. Examination revealed a maculopapular rash that included the palms and soles of the feet bilaterally. A rapid plasma reagin was positive, and the patient was treated with 2.4 million units of benzathine benzylpenicillin intramuscularly.

Diagnosis: Secondary syphilis can mimic many disease processes but classically presents as a painless macular rash on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. Diagnosis is based upon clinical examination coupled with serological testing. Emergency department management should include 2.4 million units of benzathine benzylpenicillin intramuscularly and mitigation strategies. [Clin Pract Cases Emerg Med. 2020;4(4):672–673.]

Keywords: Syphilis; secondary syphilis.

CASE PRESENTATION

A 40-year-old male presented to the emergency department due to a diffuse body rash that occurred several weeks earlier. He noted that several weeks prior to the rash developing he was involved in a group sexual encounter and did not use barrier protection. Examination revealed a diffuse maculopapular rash that included the palms and soles of the feet bilaterally (Image). A rapid plasma regain (RPR) was positive, and the patient recalled that he had a painless lesion on the shaft of his penis before the rash developed. The patient was treated with 2.4 million units of benzathine benzylpenicillin intramuscularly and admitted to the medical service for infectious disease consultation.

DISCUSSION

Over the last several decades there has been a sharp rise in the number of sexually transmitted illnesses across the United States. Syphilis is a genital ulcerative disease caused by the bacterium Treponema pallidum and has seen a 72.7% increase in the number of cases since 2013.1 Secondary syphilis is the most commonly recognized manifestation of syphilis. The classic rash of secondary syphilis consists of painless, macular, reddish or copper-colored lesions on the palms of the hands or
soles of the feet but can be extremely variable. Lesions can mimic other disease processes including pityriasis rosea, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, contact dermatitis, erythema multiforme, psoriasis, and drug eruptions. Non-cutaneous manifestations can include diffuse lymphadenopathy and hepatosplenomegaly that may mimic mononucleosis or Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Serologic testing with RPR and venereal disease research laboratory tests are most commonly used to diagnose the disease. Treatment is 2.4 million units of benzathine benzylpenicillin intramuscularly, which may elicit a Jarisch-Herxheimer reaction. Patients should be urged to abstain from sexual intercourse and discuss diagnostic strategies and treatment with their sexual partners.

The authors attest that their institution requires neither Institutional Review Board approval, nor patient consent for publication of this image in emergency medicine. Documentation on file.

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Conflicts of Interest: By the CPC-EM article submission agreement, all authors are required to disclose all affiliations, funding sources and financial or management relationships that could be perceived as potential sources of bias. The authors disclosed none.

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REFERENCES