Pancreatic panniculitis as the first manifestation of visceral disease - Case report

Paniculite pancreática como a primeira manifestação de doença visceral - Relato de caso

Fernanda Homem de Mello de Souza¹
Elisa Beatriz Dalledone Siqueira²
Lismary Mesquita³
Lincoln Zambaldi Fabricio⁴
Felipe Francisco Tuon⁵

Abstract: Pancreatic panniculitis is a rare pathological condition affecting 2-3% of patients with pancreatic disease. In 40% of cases the condition precedes manifestations of pancreatic disease. We report the case of a 71-year-old female who presented with an erythematous tender node which had appeared one month previously, progressing to ulceration and yellowish exudation. No abdominal symptoms. Biopsy revealed fat necrosis and vacuolated macrophages represented by amorphous amphophilic areas. Laboratory examination and CT scan revealed chronic pancreatitis. It is assumed that release of pancreatic enzymes such as trypsin may enhance the permeability of the microcirculation leading to lipase and amylase causing the subcutaneous fat necrosis observed in the lesions. Histology showed "ghost cells" and, firstly, septal panniculitis, followed later by lobular panniculitis. Treatment focused on resolution of the underlying pancreatic disease.

Keywords: Pancreas; Panniculitis; Adipose tissue

Resumo: A panniculite pancreática, condição patológica rara, acomete 2-3% dos pacientes com doença do pâncreas. Em 40% dos casos, precede manifestações de doença pancreática. Relata-se caso de paciente feminina, 71 anos, surgimento há 1 mês de nódulos eritematosos nas pernas que evoluíram para ulceração e saída de conteúdo amarelado. Sem sintomas abdominais. A biópsia revelou macrófagos vacuolizados e necrose gordurosa representada por áreas anofílicas, de material amorfo. Exame laboratorial e TAC demonstraram pancreatite crônica. Assume-se que a liberação de enzimas pancreáticas, tais como a tripsina, pode aumentar a permeabilidade da microcirculação e, então, a lipase e a amilase causariam a necrose de gordura subcutânea observada nas lesões. Na histologia, observam-se “células fantasmas” e panniculite septal de início e posteriormente lobular. O tratamento direciona-se a resolução da doença base.

Palavras-chave: Pâncreas; Paniculite; Tecido adiposo

INTRODUCTION

Panniculitis is a group of diseases whose hallmark is inflammation of the subcutaneous adipose tissue. May arise due to inflammatory and/or infectious mechanisms.¹² The clinical picture of panniculitis is manifested by deep erythematous plaques or nodules, with or without ulceration, on different locations of the body, but predominantly affecting the legs. Panniculitis are normally durable and in some cases can last for months - a diagnostic challenge for dermatologists and pathologists. From a clinical viewpoint, many types of panniculitis of different etiologies resemble one another, presenting as erythematous subcutaneous nodules. Some panniculitis may be a manifestation of a number of different diseases (a clas-
Acute or chronic pancreatitis and pancreatic carcinoma (usually of acinar cells) are the most common pancreatic diseases associated with pancreatic panniculitis. However, pancreatic pseudocyst, post-traumatic pancreatitis, pancreas divisum and pancreatic vascular fistulas have also been reported. 

The pathogenesis is unknown, but it is assumed that the release of...
Pancreatic enzymes such as trypsin may increase microcirculation permeability, resulting in lipase and amylase causing the subcutaneous fat necrosis observed in the lesions. Cases of pancreatic panniculitis with normal enzyme levels have been reported. These reports and the discrepancy between the relative frequency of the disease and the frequency of pancreatic panniculitis suggest the involvement of an additional etiological factor. One hypothesis is that these patients are unable to degrade pancreatic enzymes, probably due to inherited enzyme deficiencies such as alpha 1-antitrypsin (AAT).

The clinical picture of pancreatic panniculitis consists of soft or violet erythematous plaques and nodules predominantly on the legs (around the ankles and pretibial region), buttocks or trunk, which may resolve spontaneously. The nodules may evolve to fluctuation and produce necrotic sterile abscesses that ulcerate spontaneously, exuding thick oily brownish material due to liquefactive fat necrosis. More generalized cases also present with arthritis due to periarticular fat necrosis and pleural effusions, and reports exist of ascites and eosinophilia.

In 40% of cases of pancreatic panniculitis, skin lesions precede the abdominal symptoms of pancreatic disease. In these cases the average interval between the cutaneous findings and the discovery of abdominal disease is 13 weeks. A deep skin biopsy is required for diagnosis. Histologically, pancreatic panniculitis is a predominantly lobular panniculitis. Initial lesions are characterized by lymphoplasmacytic infiltration along the fibrous septum around subcutaneous fat lobules and dermal blood vessels. Coagulative pancreatic fat necrosis is characterized by collections of "ghost cells" which are anucleate adipocytes containing fine basophilic granular intracytoplasmic material arising from saponification of fat by pancreatic enzymes. These histological characteristics evolve and old lesions show more granulomatous panniculitis containing foamy histiocytes and multinucleated giant cells. Vasculitis is not present.

Treatment is supportive and targeted at pancreatic disease. The prognosis is poor in cases associated with pancreatic carcinoma.
REFERENCES

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