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Considerations in Discoid Lupus: A Comprehensive Review

Donaldo Emiliano Silva López[1], José Antonio Velarde Chávez[2], María Elisa González Robles[2], María Fernanda Romero Rivera[2], Saúl Villaseñor Angulo[2], Alma Alejandra Solano Mendoza[2]

[1]Hospital Centenario Miguel Hidalgo. Aguascalientes, Aguascalientes, Mexico.

[2]Hospital Civil de Guadalajara. Guadalajara, Jalisco, México.

ABSTRACT

Discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE) is a chronic inflammatory skin condition that can lead to disfiguring scarring and pigmentary changes. This review article provides an overview of the epidemiology, pathogenesis, clinical manifestations, and treatment options for DLE. Special considerations in the management of DLE, including the role of photoprotection, topical and systemic therapies, and the importance of multidisciplinary care, are discussed. The impact of DLE on quality of life and psychosocial well-being is also addressed. A better understanding of the complexities of DLE can aid clinicians in providing comprehensive care to patients with this challenging condition.

KEYWORDS: discoid, lupus, skin.

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INTRODUCTION

Discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE) is a chronic autoimmune condition that primarily affects the skin, presenting with characteristic erythematous plaques, follicular plugging, and scarring. It is considered a localized form of cutaneous lupus erythematosus (CLE) and can occur in isolation or as a part of systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). DLE poses a significant burden on patients' quality of life due to its chronicity, disfiguring nature, and potential for progression to systemic disease.1,2

Despite advances in understanding the pathogenesis of DLE, its etiology remains incompletely understood. Genetic predisposition, environmental factors, and dysregulation of the immune system are thought to play crucial roles in disease development and progression. The classic presentation of DLE includes well-defined, erythematous, scaly plaques with adherent scale and follicular plugging, commonly affecting sun-exposed areas such as the face, scalp, and ears. Lesions may heal with atrophy and dyspigmentation, leading to significant cosmetic concerns for patients.1,2

Treatment of DLE aims to control inflammation, minimize scarring, and prevent disease progression. Topical corticosteroids are the mainstay of therapy for mild to moderate disease, while systemic antimalarials such as hydroxychloroquine are often used for more extensive or refractory cases. Other treatment modalities, including topical calcineurin inhibitors, retinoids, and immunosuppressive agents, may be considered in certain situations.1,2

This article aims to provide a comprehensive review of the epidemiology, pathogenesis, clinical manifestations, and treatment options for DLE. Special considerations in the management of DLE, such as the importance of photoprotection, long-term monitoring, and the impact on quality of life, will also be discussed. Understanding the nuances of DLE management is crucial for clinicians to provide optimal care for patients with this complex and challenging condition.3,4

Epidemiology of Discoid Lupus:

Discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE) is a chronic autoimmune skin condition that primarily affects sun-exposed areas, presenting with characteristic erythematous plaques, follicular plugging, and scarring. While DLE can occur at any age, it most commonly affects individuals between the ages of 20 and 50, with a higher prevalence in women compared to men. The exact prevalence of DLE varies widely depending on the population studied and the diagnostic criteria used.4,5

Prevalence and Geographic Distribution:

DLE is more common in populations living closer to the equator, where there is greater ultraviolet (UV) radiation exposure. It is more prevalent in individuals with skin types

IV to VI on the Fitzpatrick scale, which are more prone to pigmentation changes and scarring. In the United States, DLE is more common in African Americans and individuals of Hispanic descent compared to Caucasians.5,6

Association with Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE):
DLE can occur in isolation or as part of SLE, an autoimmune condition that can affect multiple organs and systems in the body. Approximately 5% to 10% of patients with DLE will develop SLE, although the risk is higher in individuals with certain genetic predispositions.5,6

Environmental and Genetic Factors:
Environmental factors, such as UV radiation and certain medications, can trigger or exacerbate DLE in genetically predisposed individuals. Genetic factors, including variations in immune-related genes, have been implicated in the development of DLE, although the exact mechanisms are not fully understood.6,7
DLE is a chronic autoimmune skin condition with a complex interplay of genetic and environmental factors. Understanding the epidemiology of DLE is crucial for clinicians to recognize the condition early, initiate appropriate treatment, and monitor patients for potential systemic involvement.6,7

CLINICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF DISCOID LUPUS

Discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE) is a chronic autoimmune skin condition that primarily affects the skin, presenting with a variety of clinical manifestations. The classic presentation of DLE includes well-defined, erythematous plaques with adherent scale and follicular plugging. These lesions are typically round or disk-shaped and can vary in size from a few millimeters to several centimeters in diameter. Common sites of involvement include the face, scalp, ears, and neck, although DLE can occur on any sun-exposed area of the body.7,8

CUTANEOUS FINDINGS

In addition to the characteristic plaques, patients with DLE may also develop other cutaneous findings, such as hyperpigmentation, hypopigmentation, and scarring. Active lesions are typically erythematous and may be associated with itching or burning, while older lesions may appear atrophic and dyspigmented. The presence of scarring and pigmentary changes can have a significant impact on patients' quality of life and psychosocial well-being.7,8

MUCOSAL INVOLVEMENT

In some cases, DLE can also affect the mucous membranes, including the oral mucosa, nasal mucosa, and conjunctiva. Mucosal involvement can present as erythema, ulceration, and scarring, and can be particularly challenging to treat. 9,10

HAIR LOSS

Scalp involvement in DLE can lead to scarring alopecia, characterized by permanent hair loss and scarring of the scalp. Early recognition and treatment of scalp involvement are crucial to prevent irreversible damage. 9,10

EXTRACUTANEOUS MANIFESTATIONS

While DLE primarily affects the skin, it can also be associated with systemic manifestations, particularly in patients with concomitant systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE). Systemic symptoms may include fatigue, malaise, joint pain, and fever, although these are less common in isolated DLE. 9,10

DIAGNOSIS

DLE is a complex skin condition with a variety of clinical manifestations. Recognition of the characteristic features of DLE, as well as potential extracutaneous involvement, is essential for accurate diagnosis and appropriate management. Close collaboration between dermatologists and rheumatologists is often necessary to provide comprehensive care for patients with DLE. 11,12

Diagnosis of Discoid Lupus:
The diagnosis of discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE) is primarily clinical and is based on a combination of history, physical examination findings, and skin biopsy results. Laboratory tests and imaging studies may be used to support the diagnosis and rule out systemic involvement. 11,12

Clinical Evaluation:
Patients with DLE typically present with characteristic skin lesions, including well-defined, erythematous plaques with adherent scale and follicular plugging. These lesions are often located on sun-exposed areas such as the face, scalp, ears, and neck. Mucosal involvement may also be present in some cases. 11,12

Skin Biopsy:
Skin biopsy is often performed to confirm the diagnosis of DLE and differentiate it from other skin conditions. Histopathological findings in DLE typically include interface dermatitis, hyperkeratosis, follicular plugging, and dermal mucin deposition. Direct immunofluorescence may show granular deposition of immunoglobulins and complement components at the dermoepidermal junction, although this finding is not specific for DLE. 11,12

Laboratory Tests:
While there are no specific laboratory tests for DLE, certain tests may be performed to assess for systemic involvement or to monitor disease activity. These may include complete blood count, erythrocyte sedimentation rate, C-reactive protein, renal function tests, and autoantibody testing (e.g., antinuclear antibodies, anti-dsDNA antibodies). 11,12

Imaging Studies:

Imaging studies such as chest X-ray or computed tomography (CT) scan may be performed to assess for pulmonary involvement in patients with suspected systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) or to evaluate for other organ involvement in cases of suspected systemic disease. 11,12

Differential Diagnosis:

The differential diagnosis for DLE includes other cutaneous conditions such as psoriasis, seborrheic dermatitis, and other forms of cutaneous lupus erythematosus (CLE). Differentiating DLE from these other conditions is important for guiding appropriate treatment. 11,12

In conclusion, the diagnosis of DLE relies on a combination of clinical evaluation, skin biopsy, and, in some cases, laboratory and imaging studies. Early recognition and diagnosis of DLE are essential to prevent scarring and disfigurement and to initiate appropriate treatment. Collaboration between dermatologists, rheumatologists, and other healthcare providers is often necessary to provide comprehensive care for patients with DLE. 11,12

TREATMENT OF DISCOID LUPUS

The treatment of discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE) aims to control inflammation, minimize scarring, and prevent disease progression. The choice of treatment depends on the extent and severity of the disease, as well as the patient's response to therapy.13,14

TOPICAL THERAPIES

Topical corticosteroids are the mainstay of therapy for mild to moderate DLE. High-potency corticosteroids are often used initially, followed by a switch to lower-potency agents for maintenance therapy. Topical calcineurin inhibitors, such as tacrolimus and pimecrolimus, may also be used as steroid-sparing agents. 13,14

INTRALESIONAL THERAPY

Intralesional corticosteroid injections may be used for localized or persistent lesions that are unresponsive to topical therapy. Triamcinolone acetonide is the most commonly used agent for intralesional injections. 13,14

SYSTEMIC THERAPIES

Systemic therapies may be necessary for more extensive or refractory DLE. Antimalarial agents, such as hydroxychloroquine and chloroquine, are considered first-line systemic therapies for DLE. These agents have anti-inflammatory and immunomodulatory effects and are effective in controlling disease. 13,14

activity and preventing flares. Other systemic therapies, such as oral corticosteroids, methotrexate, mycophenolate mofetil, and thalidomide, may be used in cases of severe or recalcitrant DLE, but their use is often limited by potential side effects. 13,14

PHOTOPROTECTION

Photoprotection is an essential component of DLE management, as UV radiation can exacerbate disease activity. Patients with DLE should be advised to use broad-spectrum sunscreen with a high sun protection factor (SPF) and to avoid prolonged sun exposure, especially during peak hours. 13,14

LIFESTYLE MODIFICATIONS

In addition to medical therapy, lifestyle modifications can help manage DLE. Patients should be advised to avoid triggers such as smoking and excessive alcohol consumption, which can worsen disease activity. Stress management techniques may also be beneficial, as stress can exacerbate autoimmune conditions. 13,14

FOLLOW-UP AND MONITORING

Regular follow-up visits are essential for monitoring disease activity and treatment response. Patients should be monitored for signs of disease progression, such as new lesions or scarring, as well as for potential side effects of medications. Adjustments to treatment may be necessary based on disease activity and patient response. 13,14

The treatment of DLE requires a multidisciplinary approach involving dermatologists, rheumatologists, and other healthcare providers. Early recognition and appropriate treatment can help control inflammation, minimize scarring, and improve quality of life for patients with DLE. Close monitoring and regular follow-up are essential for optimizing treatment outcomes. 13,14

CONCLUSION

Discoid lupus erythematosus (DLE) is a chronic autoimmune skin condition that presents with a variety of clinical manifestations, ranging from localized skin lesions to potential systemic involvement in some cases. Management of DLE requires a multidisciplinary approach, involving dermatologists, rheumatologists, and other healthcare providers.

Early recognition and diagnosis of DLE are crucial to prevent scarring and disfigurement and to initiate appropriate treatment. Treatment options for DLE include topical therapies, intralesional corticosteroid injections, systemic therapies, photoprotection, and lifestyle modifications. The choice of treatment depends on the extent and severity of the disease, as well as the patient's response to therapy.

Regular follow-up and monitoring are essential for assessing disease activity, monitoring treatment response, and adjusting therapy as needed. Close collaboration between healthcare providers and patients is key to managing DLE effectively and improving patient outcomes.

Overall, a comprehensive understanding of the epidemiology, pathogenesis, clinical manifestations, diagnosis, and treatment of DLE is essential for healthcare providers to provide optimal care for patients with this complex and

challenging condition. Further research is needed to better understand the underlying mechanisms of DLE and to develop more targeted and effective therapies.

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