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Case of eczema herpeticum in a breast cancer patient

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Introduction & Objectives:

Eczema herpeticum (EH) is a disseminated cutaneous infection caused by the herpes simplex virus, typically occurring in patients with atopic dermatitis. However, it can also manifest in individuals with other preexisting skin conditions characterized by impaired skin barrier function (allergic contact dermatitis, Darier's disease, ichthyosis), as well as in those with immunodeficiency disorders (HIV/AIDS, cutaneous T-cell lymphoma, Hodgkin's disease, Sézary disease, and immune-compromised patients). Despite its distinctive clinical features, this uncommon condition is often misdiagnosed as other skin disorders, leading to delays in administering systemic antiviral medications and potential life-threatening complications (meningitis, encephalitis, multiple organ failure).

Materials & Methods:

We report a clinical presentation of eczema herpeticum that occurred following a radiation therapy procedure in a breast cancer patient.

Results:

A 47-year-old Caucasian female presented to our clinic with eczema on her chest that developed on the fifth day after radiation therapy procedure. She had been receiving treatment for eczema with Betamethasone + Clotrimazole + Gentamicin cream without improvement. The patient had a medical history of mastectomy due to breast cancer and had been receiving tamoxifen 20 mg daily and radiation therapy procedures.

Physical examination revealed disseminated, pruritic blisters with central depression and erosions on her breast and chest. PCR samples were collected from an unroofed vesicle, confirming the presence of HSV type 1. Consequently, the patient was diagnosed with eczema herpeticum. Following 7 days of treatment with oral Valacyclovir (1000 mg thrice daily), the lesions completely resolved.

Conclusion:

Eczema herpeticum is a rare but serious infection that may develop in immunocompromised patients. In cancer patients, herpes infections can present as atypical skin lesions, which may mimic non-infectious conditions, potentially leading to misdiagnosis. Prompt antiviral treatment can prevent viral dissemination and possible life-threatening complications.

