European Task Force on Atopic Dermatitis: position on vaccination of adult patients with atopic dermatitis against COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) being treated with systemic medication and biologics

Editor,

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is caused by rapid spread of different strains of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). The severity of infection ranges from mild, or even asymptomatic, to very severe. Signs and symptoms include fatigue, fever, exanthemas, upper respiratory illness, loss of smell and taste, pneumonia, severe acute respiratory syndrome and multiorgan failure. Risk factors for a severe or lethal course include age, male gender, obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and immune suppression.1 At the start of the pandemic, the European Task Force on Atopic Dermatitis (ETFAD) shared their position on continuation of systemic immune-modulating treatments, including immunosuppressive therapy, in atopic dermatitis (AD) patients during the time of the pandemic.2

Safe and effective vaccines are urgently needed to control the pandemic and achieve herd immunity. More than 50 COVID-19 vaccine candidates are currently in trials. mRNA vaccines lead to production of antigens by host cells, and two (RNA-1273 and BNT162b2) were recently approved in EU member states to vaccinate adults against COVID-19. A viral vector-based vaccine (AZD1222) has been approved in the United Kingdom, but not yet in the EU.

National strategic guidelines and recommendations are being developed and utilized to vaccinate initially those with increased risk factors for a severe course, as well as those being employed in critical positions. This article provides the position of ETFAD members regarding COVID-19 vaccination of adult patients with AD being treated with systemic immunosuppressive medication and biologics. A separate article discusses how dermatologist may manage allergic issues. Vaccination particularly against pneumococcus and influenza should be performed as recommended in the guidelines.3

The ETFAD acknowledges that:

- There is currently no evidence to suggest that AD is an independent risk factor for acquiring SARS-CoV-2, or of having a more severe course of COVID-19, above and beyond other important co-morbid conditions, such as obesity, cardiovascular disease and diabetes.
- Atopic dermatitis is not a contraindication to vaccination. It is unclear whether SARS-CoV-2 vaccination could cause brief AD worsening, but this is not suspected since the vaccination response is mainly T helper cell 1 skewed.4
- Systemic immunosuppressants and JAK-inhibitors used to treat AD may attenuate the vaccination response,5 but no attenuation is expected for dupilumab.6

Based on the listed uncertainties and AD disease characteristics,3,7 the risk–benefit ratio of all currently approved vaccines appears better than the risk of an infection with SARS-CoV-2, also for AD patients. There is no clear evidence to recommend that systemic AD medication is paused before or after COVID-19 vaccination. Temporary 2-week discontinuation of methotrexate slightly improved the immunogenicity of seasonal influenza vaccination in patients with rheumatoid arthritis,5 but this may not be relevant to mRNA-based vaccines. Clinicians may, therefore, consider pausing immunosuppressant possible during vaccination, typically from the vaccination day until 1 week after for JAK-inhibitors and cyclosporine, or until 2 weeks after for methotrexate and azathioprine, to possibly improve chances or appropriate vaccination response. Alternatively, the lowest dose possible may be used, for example 2.5 mg/kg/day cyclosporine, 1 mg/kg/day azathioprine and 7.5 mg/week methotrexate. The ETFAD recommends to strictly follow guidelines and decisions issued by the local and national health authorities in each country. While patients on immunosuppressive drugs for AD will need a case-by-case approach considering the specific drug and vaccine product, inadequate antibody response in selected individuals is not a major concern, and the risk/benefit of vaccination is considered favourable for the overall AD population. At least 3 weeks are recommended between the two COVID-19 vaccine doses, which increases the risk of AD flares and loss of AD control if the systemic AD medication is paused or reduced in dose for longer periods. Measurement of antibodies against SARS-CoV-2 can be done in cases with particular importance of successful immunization. If a live vaccine against COVID-19 is registered in the future, our recommendations for the use of this vaccine may be different. We encourage registration of COVID-19 AD patients in the ETFAD-supported SECURE-AD register (www.secure-derm.com), which also captures AD patients’ experiences of SARS-CoV-2 vaccination.8

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Conflicts of interest
Dr. Thysen has attended advisory boards for Eli Lilly, Regeneron, Pfizer, LEO Pharma, Abbvie and Sanofi-Genzyme, received speaker honorarium from LEO Pharma, Abbvie, Regeneron and Sanofi-Genzyme, and received research grants from Regeneron and Sanofi-Genzyme. Dr. Vestergaard has been a consultant, speaker or investigator for Novartis, Abbvie, Sanofi, Leo Pharma and Eli Lilly. Dr. Barbatov has been a principal investigator, advisory board member or consultant for Pierre Fabre Laboratory, Bio derma, Laboratoire La Roche Posay, Sanofi-Genzyme, Abbvie, Novartis, Janssen, Leo Pharma, Pfizer, Amgen, Lilly. Dr. de Bruin-Weller has been a consultant, advisory board member and/or speaker for AbbVie, Almirall, Arena, Eli Lilly, Galderma, Janssen, Leo Pharma, Pfizer, Regeneron and Sanofi-Genzyme. 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COVID-19 and HHV8 first spotted together: an affair under electron microscopy

Dear Editor

Despite the publication of articles about dermatopathology of COVID-related skin lesions,1 only a few among these investigate patients with SARS-CoV-2 and other viral co-infections showing cutaneous manifestations.

According to the growing attention dedicated by your journal to the topic of novel human coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, we decided to share the rather interesting case of a woman with previous history of Kaposi sarcoma without active skin lesions, who was recently hospitalized for COVID-19 infection. The patient’s newly emerging and evident skin manifestation consisted in bluish-red maculopapules (Fig. 1a) that have been biopsied revealed a dermal plaque made of spindle cells arranged in short fascicles lining irregularly shaped vascular slits and vascular structures surrounded by endothelial cells with plump nuclei. The spindle cells displayed mild atypia and rare mitotic figures, and the underlying epidermis was atrophic with a basal hyperpigmentation (Fig. 1b,c). As dermatopathologists, we performed an immunohistochemical analysis to further investigate the histological picture. The analysis results provided that all the spindle cells showed nuclear positivity for HHV8 (Clone 13B1) and cytoplasmatic reactivity for Podoplanin (Clone D2–40) (Fig. 1d, e).

These findings confirm our suspect of Kaposi’s sarcoma in plaque phase. Even though we could be satisfied with the diagnosis, we could not ignore the concurrent COVID-19 infection that seemed to correlate with skin rash development, so we decided to perform transmission electron microscope (TEM) analysis and with our surprise we observed not one, but two different viral families:

Figure 1 (a) Clinical picture at the admission in the COVID Hub from our patient affected by quiescent Kaposi sarcoma. (b, c) Haematoxilin and eosin staining of a Kaposi sarcoma in plaque stage. Compared with an early patch phase, here the spindle cell proliferation is easy to identify. Immunohistochemical analysis to confirm Kaposi sarcoma: HHV8-specific stain (d) shows nuclear positivity in the spindle cells; the same cellular population is highlighted by Podoplanin (D2–40) showing membrane and cytoplasmatic positivity (e). (f, g) Vascular slit-like spaces in haematoxilin and eosin section and with immunohistochemical stain CD31 that allows to highlight vascular structure.