INTRODUCTION

Melasma is a relatively common acquired symmetric hypermelanosis characterized by irregular light-to-gray-brown macules and patches on sun-exposed areas. Many therapeutic agents are available but are unsatisfactory. Recently, it has been demonstrated that lincomycin (LM) and linoleic acid (LA) can inhibit melanogenesis in vitro. Our purpose was to investigate the clinical efficacy of topical application of LM and LA in combination with betamethasone valerate (BV) in melasma patients. Forty-seven Korean female adults with clinically diagnosed melasma were enrolled in a 6-week, double-blind, randomized clinical trial. Patients were treated with one application of the vehicle (group A), 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV (group B), or 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV and 2% LA (group C) on the face every night. Determination of efficacy was based on the Melasma Area and Severity Index (MASI) score and objective assessment (no effect, mild, moderate, or excellent) at intervals of 2 weeks until the end of the study at 6 weeks. After 6 weeks, in comparison with the pre-treatment MASI score, the average MASI score of group C decreased to 68.9%, compared with 98% in group A \( (p<0.05) \) and 85.4% in group B. There was no statistically significant difference between group A and group B. Seven patients (43.7%) in group C revealed more than moderate improvement in objective assessment, compared with none in group A and two patients (12.5%) in group B. There were no significant side effects. Topical application of linoleic acid is considered to be effective in the treatment of melasma patients.

Key Words: Lincomycin; Linoleic Acid; Melanosis; Melasma

Therapeutic Effect of Topical Application of Linoleic Acid and Lincomycin in Combination with Betamethasone Valerate in Melasma Patients

Melasma is an acquired symmetric hypermelanosis characterized by irregular light-to-gray-brown macules and patches on sun-exposed areas. Many therapeutic agents are available but are unsatisfactory. Recently, it has been demonstrated that lincomycin (LM) and linoleic acid (LA) can inhibit melanogenesis in vitro. Our purpose was to investigate the clinical efficacy of topical application of LM and LA in combination with betamethasone valerate (BV) in melasma patients. Forty-seven Korean female adults with clinically diagnosed melasma were enrolled in a 6-week, double-blind, randomized clinical trial. Patients were treated with one application of the vehicle (group A), 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV (group B), or 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV and 2% LA (group C) on the face every night. Determination of efficacy was based on the Melasma Area and Severity Index (MASI) score and objective assessment (no effect, mild, moderate, or excellent) at intervals of 2 weeks until the end of the study at 6 weeks. After 6 weeks, in comparison with the pre-treatment MASI score, the average MASI score of group C decreased to 68.9%, compared with 98% in group A \( (p<0.05) \) and 85.4% in group B. There was no statistically significant difference between group A and group B. Seven patients (43.7%) in group C revealed more than moderate improvement in objective assessment, compared with none in group A and two patients (12.5%) in group B. There were no significant side effects. Topical application of linoleic acid is considered to be effective in the treatment of melasma patients.

Key Words: Lincomycin; Linoleic Acid; Melanosis; Melasma
MATERIALS AND METHODS

Patients

The study included forty-seven Korean female adults (mean age, 39.7 yr; range, 28-54) with a clinical diagnosis of melasma. The subjects were randomized according to the order they were enrolled into the study. Fifteen women (mean age, 39.7 yr; range, 31-52) were treated with the vehicle (group A), sixteen (mean age, 39.8 yr; range, 28-47) with 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV (group B), and sixteen (mean age, 39.7 yr; range, 30-54) with 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV and 2% LA (group C). Prior to enrollment into the study, none of the patients had used systemic or topical agents for at least 1 month or 2 weeks, respectively. Patients with a history of systemic illness and nursing or pregnant women were excluded. All patients signed informed consent forms, approved by the institutional review board of Kyunghee University Hospital.

Treatment

Patients were instructed to apply the ointments to the pigmented areas of melasma lesions once daily at night. Patients were advised to avoid sun-exposure and to use topical sunscreen with sun protection factor of at least 15 during the entire period of the treatment. This study started after the summer months in all patients to avoid seasonal effect.

Clinical evaluation

At baseline, patients were questioned as to the age of onset and family history of melasma. A clinical pattern of melasma was assigned to each patient as centrofacial, malar, or mandibular. Wood’s light was used to determine the melasma type as epidermal, dermal, or mixed. Determination of treatment efficacy was based on the Melasma Area and Severity Index (MASI) scores and objective assessment before treatment and at intervals of 2 weeks until the end of 6 weeks’ treatment. The MASI system was developed by Kimbrough-Green et al. (11) and calculated by the following equation:

\[
\text{MASI} = 0.3 \, (D_F + H_F) \, A_F + 0.3 \, (D_M + H_M) \, A_M + 0.3 \, (D_C + H_C) \, A_C
\]

where D is darkness, H is homogenesity, A is area, F is forehead, MR is right malar, ML is left malar, C is chin, and the values 0.3, 0.1 = respective percentages of the total facial area.

Objective assessment was grouped into four categories: (1) no effect (no visible changes of pigmentation); (2) mild (decrease of visible pigmentation, but there is still some visible border); (3) moderate (marked decrease of visible pigmentation, but there is still some visible border); and (4) excellent (a complete loss of visible abnormal pigmentation), which was a modification of the objective assessment developed by Jimbow (12). Two dermatologists evaluated the MASI score and objective assessment for each photograph independently. A mean of the MASI scores by each investigator was calculated.

Photography

Color photographs of patients were taken at baseline and after 2 and 6 weeks of treatment. The en face view and the left and right oblique profiles of each patient were taken using a reproduction ratio of 1:4.

A Nikon N70 camera with AF micro 105 mm lens, SB 23 Nikon flash with Canfield twin flash clinical system, and two 5 × 2 ft umbrellas at 45-degree angle were used against a green unit background. The photograph was taken in the exactly same location each time, in a room without natural light and lit only by fluorescent light on the ceiling.

Statistical analysis

The non-parametric Wilcoxon rank sum test was used for comparing clinical changes before and after 6 weeks of treatment in MASI scores.

RESULTS

Forty-six patients completed the 6 weeks’ treatment. One patient in group C dropped out at 4 weeks because of non-compliance. For patient demographics, see Table 1.

Clinical outcomes

After 6 weeks, in comparison with pre-treatment MASI score, the average MASI score of group C decreased to 68.9%.

| Variable                  | A (n=15) | B (n=16) | C (n=16) |
|---------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Sex (M/F)                 | 0/15     | 0/16     | 0/16     |
| Age (yr)                  | 39.7 (31-52) | 39.8 (28-47) | 39.7 (30-54) |
| Duration (yr)             | 8.5 (1-23) | 6.8 (1-20) | 10.2 (1-30) |
| Pattern (No.)             |          |          |          |
| Malar                     | 11       | 12       | 13       |
| Centrofacial              | 4        | 4        | 3        |
| Mandibular                | 0        | 0        | 0        |
| Type (No.)                |          |          |          |
| Epidermal                 | 12       | 13       | 15       |
| Mixed                     | 3        | 3        | 1        |
| Dermal                    | 0        | 0        | 0        |
| Family history (No.)      | 8        | 7        | 11       |

A: Vehicle (Hydrophilic ointment); B: 2% Lincomycin+0.05% Betamethasone valerate; C: 2% Lincomycin+0.05% Betamethasone valerate+2% Linoleic acid.
compared with 98% in the vehicle-treated group A ($p < 0.05$) and 85.4% in group B. There was no statistically significant difference between group A and group B (Fig. 1). As early as 4 weeks after treatment in group C, four (25%) out of 16 patients showed an improvement of more than 50% of the MASI score, none between 30 and 50%, 6 patients (37.5%) between 10 and 29%, and 5 patients (31.3%) less than 10% (data not shown). Patients with negative family history of melasma showed a greater decrease of the MASI score compared to those with positive family history in group C after 6 weeks of treatment ($p < 0.05$) (Fig. 2). Patients with malar pattern rather than centrofacial pattern revealed a greater decrease of the MASI score (Fig. 3). Patients with a shorter duration of melasma showed a greater decrease of the MASI score (Fig. 4). Patients with the epidermal type revealed a greater decrease of the MASI score (Fig. 5). However, the differences shown in Fig. 3, 4, and 5 had no statistical significance. Results of the objective assessment showed that seven patients (43.7%) revealed more than moderate improvement in group C, compared with two patients (12.5%) in group B and none in group A (Fig. 6). Visible changes in the pigmentation of melasma lesions could be seen as early as 2 weeks after topical application in group C. These patients in group C showed an almost complete loss of melasma lesions after 6 weeks of treatment (Fig. 7).

**Side effects**

In all three groups, there were no significant side effects during the entire period of treatment.

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**Fig. 1.** Changes of MASI score after 6 weeks of treatment.  
A: Vehicle, B: 2% Lincomycin+0.05% Betamethasone valerate, C: 2% Lincomycin+0.05% Betamethasone valerate+2% Linoleic acid.

**Fig. 2.** Changes of MASI score according to family history after 6 weeks of treatment.  
A: Vehicle, B: 2% Lincomycin+0.05% Betamethasone valerate, C: 2% Lincomycin+0.05% Betamethasone valerate+2% Linoleic acid.

**Fig. 3.** Changes of MASI score according to the pattern of melasma after 6 weeks of treatment.  
A: Vehicle, B: 2% Lincomycin+0.05% Betamethasone valerate, C: 2% Lincomycin+0.05% Betamethasone valerate+2% Linoleic acid.

**Fig. 4.** Changes of MASI score according to the duration of melasma after 6 weeks of treatment.  
A: Vehicle, B: 2% Lincomycin+0.05% Betamethasone valerate, C: 2% Lincomycin+0.05% Betamethasone valerate+2% Linoleic acid.
Lincomycin is elaborated by an actinomycete, *Streptomyces lincolensis*; it was the first lincosamide antibiotic to be used clinically. Lincomycin inhibits melanogenesis post-transcriptionally and abrogates glucocorticoid-induced melanogenesis on the transcriptional level in B16 melanoma cells (9). Fatty acids have been shown to have remarkable regulatory effects on melanogenesis in cultured B16F10 murine melanoma cells. Unsaturated fatty acids, such as oleic acid, linoleic acid, or α-linolenic acid, decrease melanin synthesis and tyrosinase activity, while saturated fatty acids, such as palmitic acid or stearic acid, increase them (10, 13). Linoleic acid (Fig. 8) is a new bleaching agent and inhibits melanogenesis by acceleration of proteolytic degradation of tyrosinase in B16 murine melanoma cells (14). It also accelerates the turn over of the
stratum corneum, which results in the faster desquamation of melanin pigment from the epidermis. Topical application of linoleic acid to UV-stimulated hyperpigmented dorsal skin of brownish guinea pigs resulted in a pigment-lightening effect (15).

There are still many arguments about the application of topical steroids for the treatment of melasma. Kligman & Willis (16) failed to find any beneficial effects from applying topical corticosteroid alone. On the contrary, topical steroids such as betamethasone, dexamethasone, clobetasol propionate, and hydrocortisone can be effectively used for depigmentation in combination with other depigmenting agents or alone (17-19). Corticosteroids have been shown to exert their antimetabolic effects by decreasing epidermal turnover (20). This in turn may also affect the melanocyte by decreasing its secretory function. Fluorinated steroids are generally more potent than non-fluorinated steroids, but the risk of adverse effects such as acne, itching, atrophy, and telangiectasias increases with the use of potent steroids. In cases where steroids are used in addition to peeling or depigmenting agents, less potent steroids should be used to minimize the side effects. Our patients did not show any steroid-induced and treatment-induced complications during the study period.

In this study, the 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV and 2% LA yielded a better outcome. It is postulated that linoleic acid should cause the pigmentary lightening effect in melasma patients, because 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV and 2% LA was clearly superior to the 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV. Contrary to in vitro test results, topical lincomycin did not have a lightening effect in melasma patients. We could not also exclude the permissive role of these components. Patients without a family history of melasma showed a statistically greater improvement in the group C, but the duration, pattern, and type were not significant factors. The effect of therapy was characterized primarily by a progressive lightening of the site treated, followed by a reduction of the size of the lesion, i.e., some parts of the lesion resolved completely, while other parts had a still discernible outline. The response rate of more than moderate improvement (43.7%) after 6 weeks treatment of 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV and 2% LA was somewhat lower than the improvement rate ranging from 65% to 73% in other reports using topical tretinoin and/or hydroquinone (11, 21). While other reports evaluated the efficacy during a 10-week period, this study employed a 6-week study period. This may explain the lower response rate in this study. The formula containing tretinoin and/or hydroquinone induces irritation dermatitis in many cases (22), which hampers the use of this formula. Other investigators have reported increased pigmentation in Asian patients on daily tretinoin and hydrocortisone; the increased pigmentation was presumably caused by retinoid dermatitis, with resultant postinflammatory hyperpigmentation (17). The formula used in this study did not show any side effects including irritation.

In conclusion, the effect of treatment with 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV and 2% LA was superior to that with 2% LM mixed with 0.05% BV in melasma patients. Topical application of the formula containing linoleic acid in this study is considered to be effective in the treatment of melasma patients without apparent side effects.

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