Cough headache as a presenting feature of posterior reversible encephalopathy syndrome (PRES)

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A 23-year-old man with chronic renal failure on maintenance haemodialysis was referred to the neurology outpatient clinic with new onset cough headache. On evaluation, his blood pressure was 220/120 mmHg and outpatient fundus photography showed grade IV hypertensive retinopathy. Urgent magnetic resonance imaging showed features of posterior reversible encephalopathy syndrome (PRES). Emergent treatment of hypertension led to a rapid resolution of his cough headache. New onset cough headache may be a marker of PRES.

KEYWORDS: cough headache, PRES, posterior reversible encephalopathy syndrome

DOI: 10.7861/clinmed.2020-1080

Case presentation

A 23-year-old man on haemodialysis presented to us with a new onset headache of 10 days duration. He had undergone a live related-donor renal transplant 10 years previously for bilateral multi-cystic dysplastic native kidney disease. With triple immunosuppression (tacrolimus, mycophenolate mofetil and prednisolone), he maintained stable graft functions for 7 years. After this, he developed a progressive worsening of renal functions. In April 2019, a graft biopsy showed features of chronic antibody mediated rejection, and haemodialysis had been initiated 4 months earlier. His current headache appeared during bouts of coughing or sneezing. It was a generalised, severe, brief (<1 minute) holo-cranial headache that subsided spontaneously, and it occurred 2–3 times a day. He had a history of hypertension for the past 1 year and was taking metoprolol, hydralazine and prazosin. His medications included subcutaneous epoetin beta (RhEPO; a synthetic, recombinant of erythropoietin) 4,000 IU three times per week. His blood pressure was 220/120 mmHg. A neurology outpatient fundus photograph revealed grade IV hypertensive retinopathy without any other neurological findings. Serum creatinine levels were 663 μmol/L and electrolytes were normal.

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Fig 1. Fundus photographs showing optic disc oedema with cotton wool spots and scattered blotchy haemorrhages. a) Right eye. b) Left eye.

Fig 2. Axial fluid-attenuated inversion recovery magnetic resonance imaging of the brain showing scattered hyperintensities in the cerebellum (red arrow), and temporal cortices, occipital cortices and subcortical U-fibres (yellow arrows).
Obstructive hydrocephalus. Meningitis. Subdural hematoma. Posterior reversible encephalopathy syndrome. Acute sphenoid sinusitis. Treatment of accelerated hypertension may be sufficient to cure PRES. Cough headache should prompt neuro-imaging to identify secondary causes. Cough headaches could indicate an evolving PRES. Meningioma. Brain metastases. Acute sphenoid sinusitis. Meningitis. Cerebral aneurysms. Posterior reversible encephalopathy syndrome.

Case progression and outcome
A diagnosis of cough headache secondary to PRES was considered. RhEPO was identified as a potential culprit and discontinued. Over the next 3 days, his blood pressure reduced to 160/100 mmHg and his cough headache disappeared. Levetiracetam was started pre-emptively for seizures. He was discharged uneventfully after 5 days.

Discussion
Cough headache is a well described, but rare headache. Headaches are characteristically triggered by a rapid increase in intra-abdominal pressure which occurs with coughing, sneezing or straining. Two types of cough headache are described: primary and secondary (symptomatic) cough headache. Primary cough headache is defined by the International Headache Society (IHS) as a headache, precipitated by coughing or straining in the absence of any intracranial disorder and lasting up to 30 minutes. Almost any other type of underlying headache (such as migraine or tension type headache) can be exacerbated by coughing, but are not included in the rubric of cough headache. Secondary (symptomatic) cough headache (SCH) comprises around 40% of cough headaches and is associated with a wide variety of aetiologies. Prominent among them are posterior fossa lesions and Chiari malformations, which account for nearly 80% of SCH (Box 1). PRES is a characterised by headache, seizures, altered mental status or cortical visual disorders (such as cortical blindness and hemianopsia). Headaches are reported in up to 50% of patients with PRES. Most often, headaches are diffuse and gradual in onset, or of the thunderclap variant (in which MR angiography changes of reversible cerebral vasoconstriction accompany PRES). Cough headache has not been described in PRES. MRI shows white matter vasogenic oedema predominantly affecting the subcortical and cortical regions of the occipito-parietal lobes, however, oedema can involve the cerebellum, brainstem or even frontal regions in more severe cases. These changes are well appreciated on T2 or T2-FLAIR MRI sequences. Severe PRES can lead to cerebral infarction or haemorrhage. Prompt recognition and treatment of the underlying condition can lead to good outcomes and reversibility of the MRI changes on follow-up. Most patients experience a good outcome within weeks, although up to 15% of patients can develop morbidity or mortality with severe PRES.

Key points
- Cough headache should prompt neuro-imaging to identify symptomatic causes.
- Cough headaches could indicate an evolving PRES.
- Treatment of accelerated hypertension may be sufficient to cure cough headaches in certain cases.

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Box 1. Conditions associated with a secondary cough headache
- Chiari type 1 malformation.
- Posterior fossa lesion
- Meningioma.
- Obstructive hydrocephalus.
- Spontaneous intracranial hypotension.
- Subdural hematoma.
- Brain metastases.
- Acute sphenoid sinusitis.
- Meningitis.
- Cerebral aneurysms.
- Posterior reversible encephalopathy syndrome.