Dermatologic considerations in ultraorthodox Jews: An illustrative case series

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Key words: allergic contact dermatitis; alopecia areata; atopic dermatitis; dupilumab; HSV-1; neonatal herpes; traction alopecia.

INTRODUCTION

The estimated worldwide census of Jews showed that 39% lived in the United States in 2013. Sixty-two percent of orthodox Jews are strictly observant ultraorthodox (Haredi) Jews.1 Ultraorthodox Jews marry younger and have twice as many children than other adults of the Jewish faith.2 Observance of ultraorthodox Judaism includes a variety of observances some of which are listed in Table I.3-8 The following patient case series addresses some of the rare dermatologic manifestations of Ashkenazi ultraorthodox Jewish observance throughout the life cycle. Ashkenazi Jews are those who are of Eastern European descent.

CASE SERIES

Case 1

A full-term male infant born to a 19-year-old ultraorthodox primigravida had ritual circumcision on day 8 of life, including “metzizah b’peh,” a rare practice of orally drawing blood from the wound. On day 14, lesions developed in the groin, spreading to the distal feet and ankles, which did not respond to topical anti-infectives (Fig 1). On day 25, referral to dermatology resulted in admission for presumptive neonatal herpes, confirmed by direct fluorescence antigen testing positive for herpes simplex virus 1 (HSV-1). The child responded well to 21 days of intravenous acyclovir.

Case 2

A 7-year-old ultraorthodox Jew boy had truncal flares of atopic dermatitis. The child responded well to triamcinolone ointment 0.1% and had a reduction in truncal flaring with a change from wool to cotton tzitzis/t.

Case 3

A 10-year-old ultraorthodox man presented with asymmetry of his sideburns (payos/t) as part of his alopecia areata (Fig 2).

Case 4

An 18-year-old ultraorthodox man presented with intractable head and neck dermatitis that had failed to respond to topical therapies (Fig 3). Complete remission was noted with dupilumab therapy after 1 year, except for a solitary square plaque on the forehead. Phylactery (tefillin) allergic contact dermatitis was then confirmed by patch testing demonstrating 1+ fragrance mix and 2+ potassium dichromate reactions.

Case 5

A 46-year-old ultraorthodox woman presented with a 1.5-cm² area of scarring alopecia in the frontal scalp, corresponding to the hair clip on her wig (sheitel) (Fig 4). The patient responded well to a wig attached to a cotton headband, without clips.
DISCUSSION

Case 1 was previously reported by the New York State Department of Health in a series of 11 cases of HSV-1 infections from ritual circumcision (November 2000-December 2011). Ten of the children were hospitalized, and 2 died. The dermatologist seeing neonates and infants should have a high level of suspicion. At this time, polymerase chain reaction testing for HSV-1 would be the recommended test for rapid confirmation as it is significantly more rapid and sensitive than viral culture. The relative risk of neonatal HSV infection is 3.4 times in the setting of metzizah b’peh.9 Specialized counseling documents and advisories have been developed and are accessible online.10

Men are commanded in the Hebrew Bible to wear the tzitzis/t, a tunic-like garment that goes over the head, is worn over the chest, and has specially knotted fringes on all 4 corners. Some ultraorthodox men wear it against the body, and others wear it over a shirt or undershirt. The practitioner should be aware that the garments are usually wool and can cause flare eczema when worn against the body.11

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Table I. Orthodox observance by sex and age group

| Practice            | Age/Timing                  | Hebrew terminology                 | Associated dermatologic issues                          |
|---------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| **Male**            |                             |                                    |                                                        |
| Circumcision        | Day 8 of life *             | Bris/t (bris/t milah)              | Surgical complications                                  |
|                     |                             |                                    | Transmission of HSV-1 2,4                                |
| Haircut             | Age 3                       | Upshirin                           | None reported 1                                        |
| Long sideburns      | Age 3 and over              | Payos/t                            | None reported                                          |
| Fringed garment     | Age 3 and over              | Tzitzis/t (tallis/t katan)         | Wool can cause itching in some individuals             |
| Skullcap            | Age 3 and over              | Kippah/yarmulkah                   | Attached metal pin fasteners have been reported to cause pseudo-alopecia areata 6 |
| Coming of age       | Age 13                      | Bar mitzvah ‡                      | Normative and associated with self-image development 7  |
| Phylacteries        | Age 13 and over             | Tefillin                           | Contact dermatitis                                     |
| Prayer shawl        | Age 13 for Sephardic Jews   | Tallis/tallit                      | Associated with lower cardiac mortality 10             |
| wore the fringed garment as part of Jewish practice. At the time of marriage for most Ashkenazi Jews, ultraorthodox Jews may never cut the payot. Women are commanded to cover their hair as part of religious practice. Modern guidelines recommend covering the hair, but not all ultraorthodox women practice this. Bar mitzvah ‡ Taking on full adult observances of the unmarried.

| **Female**          |                             |                                    |                                                        |
| Practice            | Age/Timing                  | Hebrew terminology                 | Associated dermatologic issues                          |
| Naming              | The first week of life in synagogue | None reported                      |                                                        |
| Coming of age       | Age 12                      | Bas/t mitzvah ‡                    | None reported                                          |
| Hair coverage       | After marriage              | Tiechel (scarf)                    | Hair loss from clips                                    |
|                     |                             | Sheitel (wig)                      |                                                        |

HSV-1, Herpes simplex virus 1.

*May be deferred for health reasons.

†None reported: PubMed search for term “upshirin,” no results were found; PubMed search for payos/t yielded an author by that name, but no discussion of the hair; PubMed search was negative for traditional tallis/tallit usage.

‡Taking on full adult observances of the unmarried.
that condition is over the crown. Traction alopecia from hair clips on wigs is a concern for ultraorthodox women who maintain hair under their wigs. To reduce traction, the patient can use a soft cotton band to hold the wig in place.

Tefillin (phylacteries) are small, tanned leather boxes containing parchments inscribed with religious texts. It is a positive commandment for men to wear them. Tefillin consist of a portion for the head, affixed with a leather strap, and an arm portion, affixed with a leather strap that is wound around the forearm, hand, and fingers. Tefillin or phylactery allergic contact dermatitis caused by potassium dichromate allergy has been described in orthodox Jewish men. In case 4, phylactery allergy became obvious after 12 months of dupilumab therapy. Dupilumab therapy has been described elsewhere as a potential therapy for allergic contact dermatitis and can be considered in refractory Tefillin dermatitis.
Ultraorthodox Jews are a religious minority subset, within the religious minority of Judaism. Sensitivity to and awareness of ultraorthodox Jewish patients’ religious practices are needed to properly approach this population. Avoidance of negative judgment or culturally insensitive interventions is necessary to appropriately address cultural dermatoses.

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