A woman with an itchy hyperpigmentation on her back

Lieke Hondebrink general practitioner in training, Wim Opstelten general practitioner

Health Center Vondelplein, Amersfoort, Netherlands

A 67 year old woman with a known history of type 2 diabetes and hypertension visited our general practice because of an itchy skin patch on her back. It had been there for several years and had become darker. She did not have any previously documented dermatological history. On physical examination, we observed an ill defined, slightly raised brownish patch, approximately the size of an adult hand, below her left scapula (fig 1). She had slightly reduced sensation over the affected area on contact with a cotton swab.

What is the most likely diagnosis based on this information?

Answer

Notalgia paraesthetica.

Notalgia paraesthetica is more common in women. A case series reported 50-60 years as the mean age of onset. It is a clinical diagnosis of exclusion. Differentials include: pityriasis versicolour (scattered, slightly squamous eruptions, mostly bilateral, no dermatomal distribution), tinea corporis (reddish, slightly squamous patch, activity on the edge of the eruption, central healing, no dermatomal distribution), cutaneous amyloidosis (bilateral, no dermatomal distribution), erythema ab igne (direct relation with heat source, no dermatomal distribution), and cutaneous morphoea (isolated patches of hardened and thickened skin, no dermatomal distribution).

Notalgia paraesthetica is characterised by localised pruritus, burning, and hyperaesthesia, hypoaesthesia, and/or paraesthesia in a unilateral distribution in the mid back in one of the dermatomes from T2 to T6. These features are caused by chronic scratching and are frequently associated with hyper- or hypopigmentation. Biopsy is not required.

There is no definitive treatment. Consider antihistamines, menthol ointment, topical corticosteroids, topical capsaicin, gabapentin, physiotherapy, and physical exercise for the pain and pruritus. In some cases the condition persists for more than 20 years.

Learning points

- Consider notalgia paraesthetica when there is unilateral hyperpigmentation below the scapula.
- Notalgia paraesthetica is a chronic, acquired sensory and neuropathy-like condition that can last for several years.
- Reassure the patient that the condition is benign and self limiting.

Patient outcome

The patient was reassured by the benign and self limiting character of the condition. Five years later she still experiences occasional mild itching, for which she uses menthol ointment when necessary.

Patient consent obtained.

Provenance and peer review: not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Competing interests The BMJ has judged that there are no disqualifying financial ties to commercial companies. The authors declare the following other interests: none.

Further details of The BMJ policy on financial interests is here: https://www.bmj.com/about-bmj/resources-authors/forms-policies-and-checklists/declaration-competing-interests

Correspondence to W Opstelten w.opstelten@umcutrecht.nl


Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions