Growing fatty mass in the back: diagnosis of a multiple symmetric lipomatosis (Madelung's disease) in association with chronic alcoholism

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Part 2: answer

Growing fatty mass in the back: diagnosis and discussion

Diagnosis

Multiple symmetric lipomatosis (Madelung's disease)

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Discussion

Multiple symmetric lipomatosis was first described in 1888 by the German surgeon Otto Madelung [1]. Several years later, Lanois and Bensaude described a further case series of the same entity, which is now referred to as Madelung's disease or Lanois-Bensaude syndrome [2].

Most affected patients are men with a history of chronic alcoholism. Typical signs of this condition are slowly growing fatty masses around the neck, upper part of the arms, pelvis, back and the thigh. There is a predilection for people from the Mediterranean [3].

The pathogenesis of this syndrome is unknown. Recently published data suggest that children with similar findings might have an underlying mitochondrial dysfunction [4, 5]. However the great majority of cases of Madelung's disease occur in men aged between 30 and 70 years with known alcoholism [6].

There are only a few reports of complications. One report describes sudden deaths in association with Madelung's disease [7]. There is also one description of spontaneous transformation of Madelung's disease into a liposarcoma [8]. From the radiological point of view, this can be problematic because of difficulties in distinguishing between lipoma and well-differentiated liposarcoma [9].

To our knowledge, there is no consensus on disease management or therapy. Reducing alcohol consumption is recommended [10]. Surgery or lipid-lowering therapy may be recommended in the presence of symptomatic lipomas [11].

The differential diagnosis might include dietary obesity, corticosteroid use, hamartomatous polyposis and adipositas dolorosa (Dercum's disease). Our patient had a body mass index of 18.7 (normal) and had no history of corticosteroid use. Multiple subcutaneous lipomas may occur in Bannayan-

Zonana syndrome, another of the hamartomatous polyposis syndromes, in which case it may be associated with a disturbed lipid distribution and storage [12, 13]. Adiposis dolorosa also results in multiple lipomas, but these are typically described as painful [14].

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