

Dermatologic emergencies in identification and initial management.

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Introduction

Dermatologic emergencies, though relatively rare, are critical conditions requiring immediate recognition and intervention due to their potential for significant morbidity and mortality. These emergencies span a variety of underlying causes, including severe infections, drug reactions, systemic diseases, and inflammatory disorders. This article explores common dermatologic emergencies, their clinical features, and initial management strategies [1].

Stevens-johnson syndrome (sjs) and toxic epidermal necrolysis (ten)

Stevens-Johnson Syndrome (SJS) and Toxic Epidermal Necrolysis (TEN) are severe mucocutaneous reactions often induced by medications. They are characterized by extensive necrosis and detachment of the epidermis [2,3].

Clinical features

SJS and TEN typically begin with a prodrome of fever, malaise, and upper respiratory tract symptoms. This is followed by the rapid onset of erythematous macules, which progress to blistering and sloughing of the skin. Mucosal involvement is common, affecting the eyes, mouth, and genitalia. The differentiation between SJS and TEN is based on the extent of body surface area (BSA) involved: SJS involves less than 10% BSA, TEN involves more than 30%, and overlap SJS/TEN involves 10-30% [4,5].

Management

Early recognition and discontinuation of the offending drug are crucial. Management is often supportive and may require admission to an intensive care unit or burn unit for wound care, fluid and electrolyte management, and infection control. Intravenous immunoglobulin (IVIG) and corticosteroids are sometimes used, though their efficacy is debated [6].

Staphylococcal scalded skin syndrome (ssss)

Staphylococcal Scalded Skin Syndrome (SSSS) is caused by the exfoliative toxins of *Staphylococcus aureus*. It primarily affects neonates and young children [7].

Clinical features

SSSS presents with fever, irritability, and a diffuse erythematous rash that quickly progresses to exfoliation of the skin. The Nikolsky sign (gentle rubbing of the skin causing exfoliation) is positive. Unlike SJS/TEN, mucous membranes are typically spared.

Management

Prompt administration of antistaphylococcal antibiotics, such as nafcillin or oxacillin, is essential. Supportive care, including fluid management and wound care, is similar to that for burns. Mortality is low in children but higher in adults due to underlying comorbidities [8,9].

Erythroderma

Erythroderma, or exfoliative dermatitis, involves widespread redness and scaling of the skin, covering more than 90% of the BSA. It can be a manifestation of various underlying conditions including psoriasis, eczema, drug reactions, and malignancies.

Clinical features

Patients present with diffuse erythema, scaling, and often pruritus. Systemic symptoms such as fever, malaise, and lymphadenopathy are common. Complications include high-output cardiac failure, thermoregulatory disturbances, and secondary infections.

Management

Identifying and treating the underlying cause is paramount. Supportive care involves maintaining skin hydration, electrolyte balance, and temperature regulation. Hospitalization is often necessary, and systemic corticosteroids or immunosuppressive agents may be used depending on the etiology.

Necrotizing fasciitis

Necrotizing fasciitis is a rapidly progressing soft tissue infection characterized by widespread necrosis. It is often caused by polymicrobial infections including Group A *Streptococcus*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, and anaerobes.

Clinical features

Early symptoms include severe pain disproportionate to physical findings, erythema, and swelling. As the disease progresses, skin changes to a dusky or purplish hue, and bullae or necrosis may develop. Systemic signs of sepsis, such as fever, tachycardia, and hypotension, are common. Immediate surgical debridement is critical for survival. Broad-spectrum intravenous antibiotics should be initiated promptly, typically including coverage for gram-positive, gram-negative, and anaerobic organisms. Supportive care for sepsis, including fluid resuscitation and vasopressors, may be required. Angioedema is the rapid swelling of the deeper layers of the

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skin, often involving the face, lips, throat, and airways. It can be life-threatening when it leads to airway obstruction. Angioedema presents with sudden onset of swelling, which may be associated with urticaria. It can be triggered by allergic reactions, medications (notably ACE inhibitors), or hereditary conditions. Immediate assessment of the airway is crucial. If airway compromise is suspected, securing the airway through intubation or tracheotomy may be necessary. Treatment includes administration of epinephrine, antihistamines, and corticosteroids. For hereditary angioedema, C1 esterase inhibitor concentrates or bradykinin receptor antagonists may be used.

Toxic shock syndrome (TSS)

Toxic Shock Syndrome is a severe illness caused by toxin-producing strains of *Staphylococcus aureus* or *Streptococcus pyogenes*. It is characterized by sudden onset of fever, rash, and multi-organ involvement.

Clinical Features

TSS presents with high fever, diffuse erythematous rash resembling a sunburn, desquamation of the palms and soles, hypotension, and involvement of three or more organ systems. Symptoms may include vomiting, diarrhea, myalgia, and altered mental status. Early recognition and supportive care in an intensive care setting are critical. Antibiotic therapy targeting the causative organism, including clindamycin to inhibit toxin production, is essential. Intravenous fluids, vasopressors, and management of organ dysfunction may be required [10].

Conclusion

Dermatologic emergencies require prompt identification and intervention to prevent serious outcomes. Recognizing the clinical features and initiating appropriate management can significantly impact patient prognosis. Healthcare providers should maintain a high index of suspicion for these conditions and ensure timely referral to specialized care when necessary. Early and aggressive treatment, including supportive measures and targeted therapies, is the cornerstone of managing these critical dermatologic conditions.

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