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Unilateral eosinophilic fasciitis (Shulman syndrome) with excellent response to combined treatment with methotrexate therapy and compression brace

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Dear Editor,

We report the case of a 78-year-old caucasian male examined in our dermatological unit for swelling of the right arm.

He described an increase in right arm size, which had a slow and progressive growth over the last two years and a perception of skin hardening and difficulty in flexing and extending the joint. Moreover, he has been experiencing muscle pain during the previous eight months.

The past medical history accounts for a non-Hodgkin B cell lymphoma marginal type treated ten years before with splenectomy and cycles of rituximab, bendamustine, and six-year-old hypertension managed with valsartan 10mg tablet daily. The rest of the medical history was unremarkable.

During the physical examination, we observed a visible right arm swelling, almost doubling in size the left one (58 cm circumference vs 30 cm), erythema and palpable skin induration with a typical texture resembling an orange peel. However, no joint pain was triggered during the physical examination [Figure 1].

Due to the typical clinical presentation, we suspected eosinophilic fasciitis in the first instance (Shulman syndrome)¹. We performed a full-thickness biopsy deep down the fascia of the arm, which showed lymphocytic infiltrate, eosinophils and oedema in the dermis. Blood tests demonstrated moderate eosinophilia ($1.65 \times 10^9/l$) and no other abnormalities, and the MRI revealed an inflammatory process of the muscle fascia, confirming the diagnosis of unilateral eosinophilic fasciitis^{1,2}.

It should be noted that it has not been considered any correlation with the previous lymphoma history, given the elapsed time.

We started glucocorticoid therapy with daily prednisone at the dose of 1 mg per kilogram^{3,4}. Still, achieving no results after two months of steroid therapy, we changed to the administration of subcutaneous methotrexate at a dosage of 15 mg per week, followed the day after with 2mg of folic acid in tablets.

At the end of three months of methotrexate therapy, the patient reported no more muscle pain and a return into the normality range for eosinophil count, but arm swelling was unaffected.

After performing an eco-colour doppler of the arm vessels to exclude arterial affection at the end of the three months of the systemic therapy, we decided to add to methotrexate an elastic compression brace made by nonwoven-fabric with a pressure range of 18-21 mmHg, which enveloped the limb from fingertips up to the armpit to be used at least during daytime^{1,5}.

Two months later, we significantly reduced the circumference (34 cm vs 30 cm of the left arm) and improved skin texture [Figure 2]. In addition, the total mobility of the right arm was recovered.

Eosinophilic fasciitis, also known as Shulman's disease, is a rare condition which initially can be misdiagnosed as lymphedema or scleroderma manifested by a rapid onset of erythema, oedema, and induration of skin and soft tissues symmetrically, preferably on the limbs, and occasionally on the trunk, associated with peripheral eosinophilia^{1,3}.

Muscle biopsy can be crucial during the diagnostical procedure, showing eosinophils located at the muscle-fascia interface with variable involvement of the underlying muscle, often associated with typical peri-fascicular atrophy and inflammatory infiltrates in the epimysial region. Sometimes, when a skin sample is included, eosinophils are also seen in the dermis in variable numbers⁶.

Moreover, it is known that the management of this disease must be timely; achieving an almost complete remission is possible while the oedematous phase is still ongoing. In contrast, once the fibrotic second phase is reached, it is harder to treat this condition since tissue modification tends to be irreversible¹.

Although methotrexate has already been reported to be effective in treating eosinophilic fasciitis, even when started late⁷, this did not happen in our case.

Since it is known that plasma exudate can lead to the increase of cytokines that can aggravate or maintain the inflammatory response⁸⁻¹⁰, we assumed that that compression, known to favour the reabsorption of liquids from the third space, could bring a synergic benefit and accelerate the clinical improvement in the actual oedematous phase.

After one year and a half, the patient maintains excellent clinical results and no haematological alterations with this treatment.

Finally, we can state that using a compressive aid when the oedematous phase is still present can be an additional therapy, added to the systemic one, which has almost no side effects but seems very effective in swelling control.

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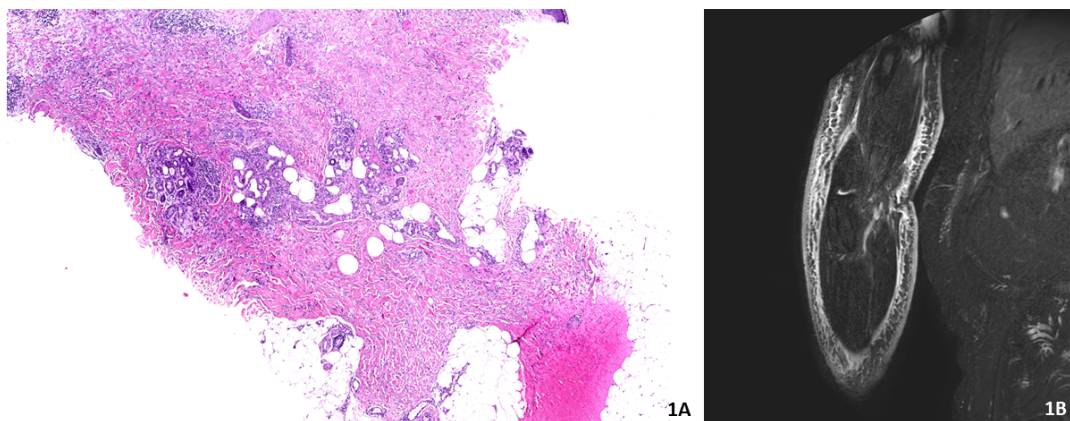


Image 1A. Deep skin biopsy of the arm reaching the muscular tissue showing eosinophilic infiltrate and oedema in the dermis and hypodermic tissue reaching the fascia E&H 5x stain 5x. Image 2B MRI axial projection showing oedema with inflammation and thickening of the muscular fasciae and hypodermic tissue.



Image 2A. Patient's right arm. Note the arm size, which was more than twice the contralateral, causing the patient difficulties in flexing the arm and swelling, with the appearance of orange peel skin. Image 2B. Patient after six months of treatment with methotrexate and the use of the elastic compression device. Note the significant reduction in the volume of the affected arm and the skin appearance, now much more similar than the unaffected one.