

BRIEF REPORT

Lost at Sea in Search of a Diagnosis: A Case of Unexplained Bleeding

Lauren E. Amos, MD,^{1*} Shannon L. Carpenter, MD, MS,¹ and Mark F. Hoeltzel, MD²

Scurvy results from a dietary deficiency of vitamin C (ascorbic acid) and is rarely thought of in modern day medicine. It now almost always occurs in pediatric patients with behavioral diagnoses, nutritionally restricted diets, and food allergies. Symptoms of scurvy include ecchymoses, bleeding gums, and arthralgias. Here, we present a 17-year-old male with autism spectrum disorder and a diet severely

deficient in ascorbic acid due to textural aversion and food preferences. He presented with recurrent arthritis, hemarthrosis, bruising, and anemia. His vitamin C level was low, and his symptoms improved promptly after treatment with ascorbic acid. *Pediatr Blood Cancer* 2016;63:1305–1306. © 2016 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Key words: autism spectrum disorder; hemarthrosis; scurvy

INTRODUCTION

A 17-year-old male was admitted to the Hematology Service with fever, left knee arthritis, hemarthrosis, and anemia. His medical history was significant for autism spectrum disorder and constipation. Prior to this presentation, he had one episode of a right knee hemarthrosis and was diagnosed with von Willebrand disease at an outside institution. He presented to our institution and a bleeding disorder evaluation was obtained, which was largely inconclusive. Von Willebrand antigen, ristocetin cofactor, and von Willebrand factor multimer distribution were normal. Hemoglobin was 6.5 g/dl (normal range 13.5–17.5), white blood cell count was 3,890/ μ l (normal range 4,500–11,000), and platelet count was normal. Prothrombin time (PT), international normalized ratio, and activated partial thromboplastin time were normal. Factor VIII was 245% (normal range 50–105). Factors II, V, VII, IX, X, and XIII levels and platelet aggregation studies were normal. His hemarthrosis did not respond to desmopressin infusion, plasma-derived factor FVIII/VWF concentrate, fresh frozen plasma, or ϵ -aminocaproic acid. The event resolved slowly on its own and he was discharged from the hospital with a diagnosis of bleeding disorder not otherwise specified. His evaluation was resumed 2 years later when his left knee hemarthrosis recurred. Orthopedics performed arthrocentesis that showed bloody fluid with neutrophilic predominance. He had a normal muscle biopsy. He was then referred to the Rheumatology Clinic and had a negative evaluation for rheumatologic causes of arthritis.

His hemarthrosis persisted and he then developed daily fevers and increased left knee pain. He was again admitted to the Hematology Service. Physical examination showed his weight and height between the 11th and 16th percentile for age. Musculoskeletal examination was significant for swelling of the left knee with overlying warmth and tenderness to palpation, but without erythema. The range of motion in flexion was limited to 60° due to pain. Skin examination revealed pallor and mild jaundice, and there was ecchymosis present over the medial aspect of the left knee. Corkscrew hairs were present on bilateral lower extremities (see Figure 1).

Due to concern for septic arthritis, blood cultures were obtained, and he was started on intravenous (IV) cefazolin. Complete blood count again showed leucopenia and anemia. Blood smear showed marked hypochromia and slight basophilic stippling. The erythrocyte sedimentation rate (ESR) was 86 mm/hr

(normal range 0–15) and C reactive protein (CRP) was 5.8 mg/dl (normal range 0–1). Coagulation factors were abnormal with PT of 16.2 sec (normal range 11.3–15.6), fibrinogen of 443 mg/dl (normal range 164–382), and D-dimer of 7.76 mcg/dl (\leq 0.49). Orthopedics was consulted and did not feel the patient's clinical examination was consistent with septic arthritis. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of left knee was obtained and showed profound synovitis with the appearance of hemarthrosis of the knee, myositis, and patchy marrow signal changes in the distal femur and proximal tibia suggestive of osteopenia (see Figure 2). Ultrasound of the left knee showed a fluid collection that was drained and consistent with hemarthrosis. Blood culture remained negative, and aerobic, anaerobic, fungal, and acid fast bacilli cultures from the fluid aspirate showed no growth. Antibiotics were discontinued as infection seemed unlikely.

Due to his recurrent hemarthrosis, arthritis, and anemia, we searched for a unifying diagnosis. Rheumatology was consulted and conducted a thorough dietary history. It was found that the patient's diet was extremely limited due to texture aversion and food preferences. His diet consisted primarily of grilled cheese sandwiches, cottage cheese, chocolate milk, or soda. He ate no citrus fruits or vegetables. This raised clinical suspicion for scurvy as his diet contained no vitamin C. Vitamin C level was obtained and was extremely low at less than 0.1 mg/dl (normal range 0.6–2.0 mg/dl). He was started on IV ascorbic acid 250 mg daily, which was then transitioned to 250 mg orally twice daily. His left knee showed decreased swelling, warmth, and tenderness to palpation. He was able to be discharged home.

Abbreviations: CRP, C reactive protein; MRI, magnetic resonance imaging; PT, prothrombin time

¹Division of Hematology Oncology, Children's Mercy Hospital, Kansas City, Missouri ²Division of Pediatric Rheumatology, C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan

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*Correspondence to: Lauren E. Amos, Division of Hematology Oncology, Children's Mercy Hospital, 2401 Gillham Road, Kansas City, MO 64108.

E-mail: lamos@cmh.edu

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Fig. 1. Corkscrew hairs, perifollicular hemorrhages, and petechiae as seen on our patient which are typical physical examination findings in scurvy.

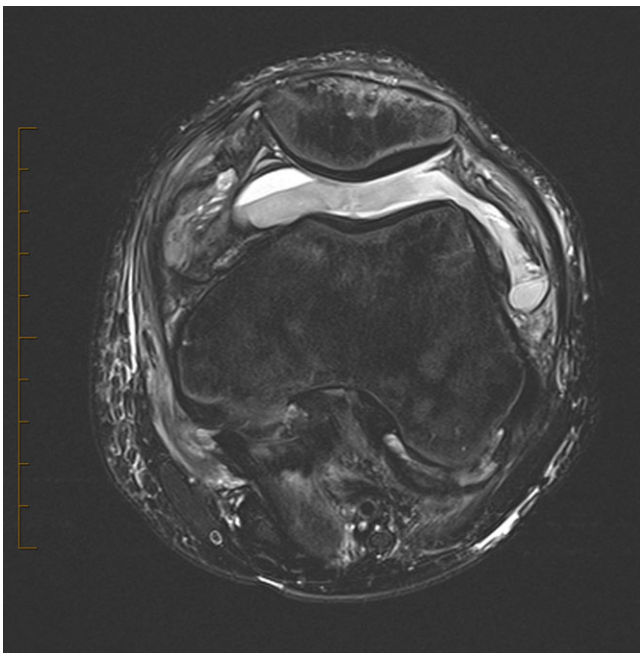


Fig. 2. Axial T2-weighted image with fat suppression reveals a moderate-sized joint effusion with layering blood products consistent with hemarthrosis.

The patient was seen as an outpatient in the Rheumatology Clinic 8 months later and reported no joint pain or swelling. His pallor, jaundice, and ecchymoses had resolved. He remained on vitamin C and multivitamin supplementation. Laboratory values including white blood cell count, hemoglobin, vitamin C level, ESR, CRP, and bilirubin normalized.

DISCUSSION

Scurvy was first widely described by James Lind in his study of sailors at sea in 1753. Since that time, the disease has largely

been eradicated due to advances in dietary content.[1] It is a clinical syndrome caused by ascorbic acid deficiency. Ascorbic acid is needed as a cofactor for collagen synthesis. Many of the clinical symptoms of scurvy relate to its role in collagen synthesis. Humans, due to their inability to convert glucose to ascorbic acid, must ingest ascorbic acid, or vitamin C, orally. Today, scurvy is largely thought of as a disease of the past. Scurvy still occurs in the adult population, most commonly in alcoholics, elderly, and patients with eating disorders. It is far rarer in the pediatric population, but can be seen in children with psychiatric or behavioral syndromes, such as our patient.[2]

Scurvy can present with petechiae, ecchymosis, and perifollicular hemorrhages.[3] Other early findings include corkscrew hairs, gingival bleeding, and hyperkeratosis. Symptoms can progress to arthritis, bone and joint pain, fatigue, depression, poor wound healing, and jaundice.[4] Bone pain occurs commonly in children and is caused by subperiosteal hemorrhages and disordered bone formation. Anemia is also well documented.[2] Case reports have also reported elevated inflammatory markers and defects in platelet aggregation.[5] Hemarthrosis can also occur and is attributed to damage to synovial blood vessels.[6]

Our patient initially presented with recurrent hemarthrosis and arthritis. Bleeding disorder work-up was negative. In retrospect, he had many other clinical findings consistent with scurvy including persistent anemia, recurrent ecchymosis, and corkscrew hairs. He progressed to develop elevated inflammatory markers and jaundice. His MRI showed typical changes including patchy marrow suggestive of osteopenia, muscular signal abnormalities, and hemarthrosis. After a thorough dietary history, he was found to consume no essential vitamin C. His vitamin C level was very low, and his symptoms resolved with adequate vitamin C supplementation. This case illustrates that scurvy should be considered in a patient with recurrent hemarthrosis or other significant bleeding manifestations with negative bleeding disorder evaluation and lack of clinical response to factor containing infusions. In addition, it is important to remember other etiologies for bleeding in the setting of a negative bleeding disorder work-up such as collagen vascular disorders such as Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. As hematologists, we should strive to expand our differential diagnosis when faced with significant or recurrent bleeding and normal hematologic evaluation.

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