Allergic Contact Dermatitis to Benzocaine: The Importance of Concomitant Positive Patch Test Results

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Introduction

Local anesthetics are widely used drugs. Their adverse effects are frequent and can be caused by immediate-type or delayed hypersensitivity reactions. Topical products containing anesthetics are increasingly applied and have the potential to cause allergic contact dermatitis. Skin testing for allergy should always be considered in such cases. We present a case of skin allergy to benzocaine that was detected incidentally by patch testing.

Case Description

The patient was a 53-year-old homemaker who was referred to the allergy unit of our dermatology department with a 2-year history of blepharitis consisting of highly pruritic, scaly...
Discussion

Benzocaine is an ester local anesthetic. Introduced in 1902, it was the first synthetic agent composed of the ethyl ester of para-aminobenzoic acid to be used in clinical practice.1 It interacts with the sodium channels of the cell membrane to block local nerve impulses. It is absorbed in very small quantities by the membrane and is hydrolyzed by plasma pseudocholinesterases (and much less so by liver cholinesterases) to metabolites that contain para-aminobenzoic acid, which is highly allergenic and responsible for anaphylactic reactions. The risk of reaction is greater in patients with altered enzyme function. Benzocaine is eliminated primarily by the kidneys, mainly as inactive metabolites.

In Spain, benzocaine is marketed for topical administration. It is used in the manufacture of various products to reduce pain, itching, or burning sensation associated with abrasions, actinic burns, insect stings, toothache, and leg ulcers. It is also found in antihemorrhoidal creams, some oral suspensions, and cough tablets and can be applied topically to the oral mucosa during dental procedures before injection of local anesthetic.

The literature contains few reports on allergy to anesthetics. Nevertheless, allergic reactions to local anesthetics are frequent. Amide anesthetics (mepivacaine, bupivacaine, lidocaine, and prilocaine) are better tolerated, whereas ester anesthetics (benzocaine, procaine, tetracaine, and chloroprocaine) are more allergenic. Among the latter, benzocaine yields the greatest number of positive results in patch tests.2 Moreover, patients with allergy to ester anesthetics can tolerate amide anesthetics, and vice versa. In the few reported cases of positive results to both groups of anesthetics, the reaction seems more likely to be concomitant sensitization than a cross-reaction between them.3,4

It has been estimated that 5% of patients who use topical preparations of benzocaine become sensitized to it; therefore, long-term use can lead to the appearance of hypersensitivity reactions (<1% of all adverse reactions).5,6 Most are T cell–mediated type IV delayed hypersensitivity reactions involving contact dermatitis that are confirmed by patch tests.6-8 Other types of hypersensitivity reaction (type I), namely, immunoglobulin E–mediated immediate-type reactions (e.g., urticaria, angioedema, or anaphylaxis) are extremely rare.9

Benzocaine can cross-react with several allergens. Possible explanations for this phenomenon include the presence of common antigenic determinants or transformation to chemically related metabolites in the skin. Benzocaine, parabens, PPD, 2,5-diaminotoluene sulfate, 2-nitro 1,4-PPD, and the azo dyes used in textiles belong to the same group. They have in common the presence of an amino substituent at the para position of the benzene ring. This structural similarity could explain the frequency of cross-reactions, such as that observed in our patient between PPD and benzocaine (Fig. 1).10

In conclusion, we have presented a case of cutaneous allergy to benzocaine that was detected incidentally and confirmed by positive patch test results in a patient referred with longstanding blepharitis. The patient had previously presented with an episode of edema on the left side of her face associated with topical application of benzocaine.
Figure 1  Similarities in the chemical structure of benzocaine and paraphenylenediamine. The amino substituent (in red) can be seen at the para position in the benzene ring.

We recommend that the standard series contain caine mix instead of benzocaine alone, since it enables us to detect most reactions to benzocaine and to screen for other common anesthetics, for example, tetracaine, which is found in products such as urinary catheter lubricants, stoma lubricants, and antihemorrhoidal creams.

Similarly, we stress the importance of taking a meticulous history in order to ensure correct diagnosis and interpretation of the skin test results, with special emphasis on concomitant positive results, since their repercussions for the patient can be serious.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

References