Hair Discoloration Caused by Etretinate

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Etretinate is well known to cause alopecia [1], curling and kinking [2] of hair in some patients treated by this drug. At times they are severe enough to cause great concern to patients and make them discontinue the treatment. We report two patients who while on etretinate therapy developed discoloration (lightening) of hair; the colour reverted to normal after the treatment had been discontinued.

Patient 1

In November 1991, a 34-year-old male Kuwaiti having psoriasis of 9 years' duration was started on etretinate (1 mg/kg body weight) for the erythrodermic psoriasis (90% involvement). Within 2 months of treatment, he noticed loss of scalp hair which slowly progressed to involve his eyebrows, moustache and body hair. During the third month of therapy he was also observed to have lightening of his hair colour (scalp, moustache, eyebrows) from brown-black to reddish brown and slowly to light red. The texture of hair was grossly normal. The patient received no systemic therapy other than etretinate. Etretinate was stopped after he had achieved near 100% clearance, and he was maintained on topical therapy. Two months after stopping the drug, the hair colour reverted to normal. In addition to the above changes he also experienced mild cheilitis, peeling of palms and soles, and mild rise in serum triglycerides during the etretinate therapy.

Patient 2

In May 1992, a 21-year-old male Kuwaiti was started on etretinate (0.75 mg/kg body weight) for recalcitrant psoriasis of the palms and soles. Within 3 months of treatment he noticed hair loss from the scalp and lightening of his scalp hair and moustache from brownish black to reddish brown. The texture of the hair was normal, and no other side effects except for mild cheilitis were noticed. The patient received no systemic medicine other than etretinate during this period. Within 2 months after stopping etretinate, the normal colour of the hair was regained.

Kinking and curling due to etretinate has been attributed to alteration of the expression of psoriatic phenotypes in the keratin composition of hair in psoriatic patients [2], whereas alopecia has been suggested to be due to a decrease in duration of anagen induced by this drug [1]. What was the mechanism behind discoloration of hair in the above patients is not certain. Whether it was due to some influence of etretinate on the melano-cytes of the pigmented hair follicles is not clear. In an experimental study on the pilose-baceous units of male hamsters, isotretinoin and etretinate were observed to have no effect on pigmented hair follicles and dermal melanocytes [3].

However, we report these cases to share our observations with others as we did not come across any reports on discoloration of hair due to etretinate.

References

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