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Severe Marking-Nut Dermatitis

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PRECIS

A 42-year-old man presented with florid vesicobullous lesions accompanied by marked burning sensation following the topical use of the sap of marking nut to treat his alopecia areata.

DISCUSSION

A 42-year-old man, known case of recurrent alopecia areata, shopkeeper by occupation, presented with thick crust over the entire scalp associated with burning sensation. In addition, he had developed blisters and erythema over his arms, neck, and trunk. His history was conspicuous for the application of the sap of *Semecarpus anacardium*, the marking nut for the treatment of alopecia areata, advised by a quack. Within an hour of the application of the sap, the patient experienced a burning sensation, followed by appearance of erythema and blistering at the sites of contact. Physical examination revealed thick dark-brown to black crust over the entire scalp (Fig. 1A), whereas bullae and erythema were evident over the arms and trunk (Fig. 1B). Complete blood counts, liver and renal functions, and blood sugar were found to be normal. A diagnosis of severe marking-nut dermatitis was rendered. The patient was started on oral prednisolone 40 mg once daily and amoxicillin-clavulanate combination. Subsequently, the patient was lost to follow-up. *Semecarpus anacardium* is known



Figure 1. A, Marking-nut dermatitis depicting thick dark-brown to black crust over the entire scalp. B, Marking-nut dermatitis illustrating bullae and erythema over the arms and trunk.

by various names: marking-nut tree/phobi nut/varnish tree in English, *anacarde d'Orient* in French, and *ostindischer tintenbaum* in German. It is a native of India and is acclaimed as “Ballataka” or “Bhilwa.” It is found in the outer Himalayas to Coromandel Coast and is closely related to cashew.¹ Interestingly, it was called “marking nut” by Europeans, because washer men often used them to mark clothes before washing. Since ancient times, marking nut has been used in the complementary and ayurvedic systems of medicine for the treatment of various ailments.¹ The nut of the tree is about 2.5 cm long, ovoid, and smooth lustrous black (Fig. 2) and contains a variety of biologically active compounds such as biflavonoids, phenolic compounds, bhilawanols, minerals, vitamins, and amino acids, which show various medicinal properties. The fruit and nut extract has been shown to possess various properties such as antiatherogenic, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antimicrobial, antireproductive, central nervous system stimulant, hypoglycemic, anticarcinogenic, and hair growth promoter.¹ Interestingly, in the present case, the extract of marking nut was prescribed in alopecia areata for its hair growth-promoting properties. Recently, removal of tattoo has been described using the paste of marking nut.² Bhilawanol from fruits was shown to be a mixture of *cis*- and *trans*-isomers of ursuhenol. Urushiol, an oleoresin, is common to various plants belonging to Anacardiaceae family, namely, cashew nut, marking nut, poison ivy, poison oak, poison sumac, mango tree, and the Japanese lacquer tree.¹ Urushiol acts as both primary irritant and an allergen. Streaks of erythema and

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Figure 2. The marking nut (*S. anacardium*): 2.5 cm long, ovoid, and smooth lustrous black.

juicy papules, followed by vesicles and bullae, are the most common clinical reaction patterns. Erythema multiforme–like lesions, morbilliform rash, scarlatina, urticaria, and nephrotoxicity are the other rare manifestations. These have been ascribed to the deposition of immune complexes. Without treatment, the dermatitis may last for up to 3 weeks. Permanent postinflammatory pigmentation may occur in dark-skinned individuals.

In older days, many British soldiers were affected by “washer-man dermatitis” induced by *S. anacardium*.³ Ever since, there have

been a few reports^{4,5} where marking nut sap was used in an attempt to treat recurrent allergic reaction to the marking-nut fumes and chronic dermatoses. In traditional systems of medicine, coconut oil, rala ointment, ghee, coriander leaves pulp, or butter mixed with musta (*Cyperus rotundus*) is being used as antidotes for marking-nut dermatitis.

PEARL

It is imperative to take cognizance of marking-nut dermatitis. Besides, renal function should be assessed because marking nut has nephrotoxic potential.

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