

Short Communication

An unusual case of baboon syndrome due to mercury present in a homeopathic medicine

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Baboon syndrome is a systemic allergic contact dermatitis characterized by a widespread exanthema favouring the major flexures (1). Inhalation of mercury vapour from a broken thermometer is a common cause (1, 2).

Case Report

A 5-year-old girl, with a family history of asthma, presented with an itchy macular erythematous rash, symmetrically distributed in the anogenital area and thighs. The lesions developed into a widespread maculopapular vesicular rash in 48 h, sparing the face, palms and soles. The eruption cleared, after systemic corticosteroids and antihistamines, with scaling and post-inflammatory hypopigmentation. Her history supplied 2 clues: neonatal periumbilical dermatitis associated with merbromin use on the cord, and the ingestion 24 h before the outbreak of a single homeopathic tablet (Mercurius Heel®S), for a cough, the composition of which included soluble mercury.

Prick tests to standard series of foods and pneumoallergens were negative and total IgE was normal. Patch testing to an extended European standard series of allergens showed positive reactions to thimerosal (0.05% pet.) at D2 (+) and D4 (++), and metallic mercury (0.5% pet.) at D1 (++), D2 (+++) and D4 (+++).

Discussion

The presence of erythema on the inner thighs, in the context of a child with fever and a symmetrical eruption in the major skin folds, is highly suggestive of systemic contact dermatitis due to mercury (baboon syndrome) (3). Sensitization to contact allergens may occur in infancy (4, 5), and in countries like Spain, Portugal, Belgium, France and Japan, mercury derivatives are still used as antiseptics (merbromin) in the newborn. We

have previous clinical experience of cases of umbilical cord contact dermatitis induced by merbromin (6), and thimerosal and metallic mercury are among the 3 most frequent contact allergens in early infancy (7).

Mercury intoxication has been described from a homeopathic drug, presenting with irritability, dermatitis and albuminuria (8). The use of mercury in vaccines has recently been questioned because of its neurotoxic effects in children (9), and homeopathic treatments containing mercury may pose an even greater risk of both allergic and toxic side-effects.

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