

Contact Cheilitis in a Saxophonist

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Précis

A case of allergic contact cheilitis in a saxophonist due to a wood reed is reported. Patch testing with the reed “as is” was sufficient for diagnosis.

Discussion

Musicians are a risk group for various skin diseases because intense contact between the instrument and the skin is usually needed during playing.¹ Clinical presentation and localization are related to the specific instrument. Cheilitis in woodwind players (eg, saxophonists, flautists, and clarinetists) and brass instrumentalists (eg, trumpeters) is frequently observed. It is mostly an irritant dermatitis, but allergic contact sensitization (eg, to colophony, nickel, and exotic woods) has been described.

A 26-year-old saxophonist was first referred to us with a 6-month history of a patch of erythema, desquamation,

hyperkeratosis, and peripheric vesiculation of the median area of the lower lip (Fig 1).

The disease developed about 2 months after he replaced the plastic reed on his saxophone with a wood reed. The result of patch tests with the Società Italiana di Dermatologia Allergologica Professionale e Ambientale standard series was negative. The result of patch testing with fragments of the wood reed wetted with water was positive (++). The same test was performed in 10 volunteers, including another saxophonist, and showed negative results. The patient returned to playing with plastic reeds, and the cheilitis subsided after a few weeks.



Figure 1. Contact cheilitis from a cane reed.

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Allergic contact cheilitis in woodwind and brass instrumentalists due to wood reeds is a rarely reported occurrence.^{2–5} The clinical features are highly suggestive, consisting of erythema with desquamation and hyperkeratosis (sometimes associated with erosions and fissures) at the median area of the lower lip, exactly underneath the reed. Rarely, as in our patient, vesiculation is found. The disease usually appears after a few months of using wood reeds. Patch testing is usually performed with the reed as is. The reed is a thin sheet of material obtained from the stalk of *Arundo donax* (of tribe *Bambuseae* of the *Gramineae* family), a plant related to bamboo. Although *Arundo donax* is a very common plant, especially in Mediterranean areas, most cases of such dermatitis have been observed in musicians. Moreover, immediate-type urticarial reaction to reeds made of *Arundo donax* has been described.³

Pearl

Contact allergy to reeds should be suspected in woodwind players with circumscribed lower cheilitis. A patch test with a piece of the reed is useful for diagnosis.

References

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