

that are worn every morning during prayer by orthodox Jewish men except on the Sabbath and holy days. They are secured to the left arm only and to the head by leather straps. The straps are wound around the forearm and hand tightly in a spiral fashion or around the head in the coronal plane.

We report two orthodox Jewish men who developed unilateral allergic contact dermatitis of the left arm to the chrome residues in these leather straps.

Case A

A 60-year-old male atopic rabbi reported a 3-year history of dermatitis affecting his left arm and forehead. The rash occurred where his skin came into contact with leather used as part of his orthodox Jewish lifestyle. The rash on the forehead occurred in the area that was in contact with the leather lining of his felt hat. Examination showed a diffuse eczematous process confined to the left arm with sparing of the hand. There was a similar appearance on the forehead.

Case B

A 17-year-old atopic boy presented with a 12-month history of itchy dermatitis affecting his left arm. Like patient A, he was an orthodox Jew and used leather strapping in the same fashion. Clinically, he had an eczematous rash confined to the left arm that was characterized by discrete linear markings in a spiral fashion (Fig. 1). These corresponded with the contact areas of the leather phylactery strapping.

Tefillin contact dermatitis: a problem in the devout

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Phylacteries (or tefillin) are leather boxes containing holy parchment



Fig. 1. Eczematous rash seen in a spiral distribution on the left arm with discrete areas of linearity consistent with contact area of leather strapping.

Both patients were patch tested [Trolab (Hermal) using Finn chambers on Scanpor] to an extended British Contact Dermatitis Society baseline series, medicaments and steroid series, their phylacteries and parts of their hat linings. Readings on D2 and D4 showed positive reactions (++) to potassium dichromate (a marker for chrome salts found in leather) and the phylacteries in both patients and, in the rabbi, to colophonium and his own hatband. Both patients' contact dermatitis improved when chrome-free phylacteries were obtained and the rabbi bought a new hat. Neither patient had foot dermatitis despite wearing leather shoes.

Discussion

Four authors have previously reported allergic contact dermatitis to tefillin, all in orthodox Jewish men (1–4). The first report from 1994 was of a 24-year-old man with a contact allergy to potassium dichromate (3) whose dermatitis had spread to involve his right arm, hip and legs. In the second case, a 40-year-old man had a spiral dermatitis affecting the left arm and fingers as well as neck and foot involvement (2). In the third case, a 69-year-old rabbi was found to have contact allergy to a number of agents including *p*-phenylenediamine and *p*-tertiary butylphenol formaldehyde resin (1). Finally, Trattner and David reported a series of seven cases of tefillin dermatitis from Israel, all of whom had a positive patch test result to potassium dichromate as well as various other allergens (4).

We suggest that the physical trauma associated with the tight winding of the straps for up to 1 hr per day may have predisposed our patients to have become sensitized to the chrome in the leather straps. The colophonium allergy in the rabbi was clinically relevant as his forehead dermatitis resolved once he stopped wearing his old hat that had a resin coated band. It is possible that the 17-year-old boy's hair protected him from the leather of his hatband. These are the first reports of tefillin dermatitis in UK-based Jews.

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