

Facial 'pillow' dermatitis due to lavender oil allergy

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Case Reports

Case no. 1

A 71-year-old woman presented with a 4-day history of acute eczema predominantly on her left cheek and forehead. She gave a past history of reacting to a perfumed facial cream and since then had always sought fragrance-free cosmetics. She adamantly denied using any perfumed products prior to this presentation. Patch testing to the European standard series, a cosmetics and preservatives series and a perfume series showed ++ reactions to fragrance mix and lavender absolute (2% pet., Chemotechnique) at 2 and 4 days.

Only when questioned about exposure to lavender products did she admit to the recent application of lavender oil drops to her pillow. An article on the medical page of a major national newspaper (1), highlighting the hypnotic benefit of lavender scent, had prompted her to start using a few drops of lavender oil on her pillow a month previously. Indeed, until the development of severe dermatitis, our patient too claimed to have benefited from a better night's sleep. She had a habit of sleeping on her left side (being deaf in her right ear, she found that her husband's snoring disturbed her less). A new pillow, avoidance of the lavender oil and the use of a moderate-potency topical corticosteroid for 2 weeks resulted in permanent resolution (follow-up 2 years).

Case no. 2

A 76-year-old retired physician requested advice about the recent development of an itchy eruption on his right cheek and forehead. Because of a severe hemiplegia, he requested a domiciliary consultation, which took place in the patient's bedroom. Examination showed a unilateral right-sided facial dermatitis. He denied using any cosmetics. A cursory search of his bedroom revealed a small bottle of lavender oil, from which drops had been applied to his pillow for the last few weeks.

His wife, a retired psychiatrist, had pleasure in exhibiting the same newspaper article (1) advocating the hypnotic effects of lavender. Indeed, she felt that it had proved superior even to benzodiazepines for her husband. Since his stroke he had slept on his right side. Patch testing confirmed a positive reaction to lavender absolute 2% pet., Chemotechnique (++ at 2 and 4 days), and discarding the oil resulted in resolution of the dermatitis.

Comment

Lavender oil has long been felt to have hypnotic properties and these have recently been highlighted in a small

trial (2). Abstracting these results in the national press disseminated this information widely, and resulted in a small local cluster of lavender oil allergy. In both of our cases, the patients had not initially considered that a natural product such as lavender oil could possibly be responsible for the acute facial allergy. This highlights the need to specifically enquire about alternative remedies when history taking or searching a home or workplace for allergens. Perhaps a label warning that allergy to aromatherapy products may occur, particularly in those known to be sensitive to perfumes, would have led to earlier suspicion of the lavender oil in both of our patients.

Lavender oil contains geraniol, linalool and linalyl acetate and has been thought to be an uncommon allergen. Calnan (3) found only 6 positive reactions in a study involving several European patch test centres. It has since been reported as causing contact dermatitis in individuals exposed both occupationally (4, 5) and as end-consumers of lavender products (6). With the increasing use of aromatherapy, both outside conventional medicine and within it (7), dermatologists should be alerted to these products as the cause of sometimes florid and unusually distributed allergic contact dermatitis (8, 9), and phototoxicity (10).

References

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