A Case of Contact Dermatitis to Venomous Snake

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Sir,

Allergic reactions to snake venom and antivenom are well known, along with the local and systemic features of snake envenomation. But, venomous snakes by way of their physical contact leading to skin lesions are not often reported. This is a short, at the same time curious report of one such incidence of dermatitis due to contact with a venomous snake along with a short review of literature.

A 35-year-old lady presented with skin lesions on the face and neck. She woke up suddenly at midnight when she felt some reptile crawling onto her face from the neck and the horrified lady just brushed aside the creature involuntarily. The relatives found a hump-nosed pit viper; a common venomous snake cited often in the neighborhood, hiding under the cot but it was killed, unfortunately. She did not have any symptoms except being very frightened by the whole incident and she then slept off. In the morning, when she got up, she found itching and burning all over the face and neck where the snake had crawled. She noticed erythematous skin lesions in the said area and there was no bite mark. She did not have any signs or symptoms of local or systemic snake envenomation (Fig. 1).

A detailed dermatological examination revealed erythematous, edematous plaque suggestive of urticaria on the forehead, eyelids, cheeks, chin, and neck. There were no erosions, vesicles, or bite marks on the skin. Her percentage of eosinophil was 5% and her total leukocyte count, other hemograms, and coagulation tests were within normal limits. The patient was treated with antihistaminic, corticosteroid, and skin emollient for application. She made a gradual recovery in 6 days and had no further problems. Elaborative counseling was done to downplay her fossilized myth that the skin which came into contact with the viper would ulcerate and never heal (Fig. 2).

Discussion

Snakes do not have any hair or epidermal dander and hence are less likely to produce allergies. But, allergies to snakes can occur though rarely as seen in our patient. Most of the time the allergies are due to the substances carried on the scales of these snakes picked up from the animals like mice, etc., when the snakes squeeze their body around the prey while feeding. However, protein on the snake scales also could cause allergy but it is very rare. Allergy to snakes could produce not just dermatological features but also respiratory symptoms.1

Another important cause of skin eruptions in humans who keep snakes as pets is due to the snake mites which infest these snakes. There are reports of a snake mite (*Ophionyssus natricis*) causing dermatitis in humans.2,3 *O. natricis* is a common snake mite which causes vesiculo-bullous eruption of the skin in humans and they could be easily identified with the naked eye making the diagnosis easy. Though the main allergy-causing domestic animals are dogs and cats, other exotic animals used as pet could also cause allergic symptoms because of known allergens as well as new ones.4 Our case report is medically relevant as there is a growing tendency and popularity of uncommon animals such as snakes being taken as pets which could pose an allergy threat. When patients with snakes as pets present to dermatology clinic with skin lesions, possibility of allergy or snake mite infestation should be considered.

References