Published in final edited form as:

J Am Acad Dermatol. 2007 September ; 57(3): 509–512.

Diffuse pain, hypophosphatemia, and a subcutaneous nodule

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Case Summary

History

A 52 year old male with no significant past medical history presented with diffuse pain and progressive weakness that had been present for approximately five years, ultimately requiring the use of a cane for ambulation. He also reported a seven inch loss in height and a change in the shape of his chest wall. Prior evaluation included radiographic imaging that revealed multiple long bone fractures and several vertebral compression fractures, and a bone scan with multiple foci suggestive of widespread malignancy. A bone marrow biopsy ruled out multiple myeloma. Laboratory evaluation showed markedly low serum phosphate, low-normal 1, 25-dihydroxy vitamin D, and phosphaturia. The patient was treated with oral phosphate, vitamin D, and calcium without improvement. The patient was referred to the National Institutes of Health Clinical Center for further evaluation and treatment.

Physical Examination

The patient ambulated slowly and reported pain while moving from wheelchair to the examination table. Physical examination was remarkable for kyphosis and barrel chest deformity. In addition, a 1.5 cm round area of hyperpigmentation overlying a hard noncompressible nodule on the left lower back was noted (Figure 1). The remainder of the skin examination was unremarkable.

Relevant Diagnostic Studies

Informative laboratory tests at the time of evaluation at the NIH included serum phosphorus, 1.8 mg/dL (reference range 2.5–4.8 mg/dL), 1,25 dihydroxy vitamin D, 22 pg/mL (22–67 pg/mL), alkaline phosphatase, 456 U/L (37–116 U/L), parathyroid hormone, 160 pg/mL (16–87 pg/mL) and ionized calcium, 1.30 mmol/L (1.22–1.38 mmol/L). The tubular reabsorption of phosphate was 48% (83–95%). The intact serum fibroblast growth factor-23 (FGF-23) concentration was 95.2 pg/ml (10–50 pg/ml).

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Editor's note: Dr. Collins is an endocrinologist in the NIDCR who evaluates patients with TIO and familial tumoral calcinosis. Clinicians can refer interested patients to the NIH patient recruitment and referral office at 800-411-1222 or by e-mail at prpl@mail.cc.nih.gov.

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This paper has not been presented previously

Conflicts of Interest Disclosure: None declared

Reprint requests: Not available

Serum levels of alanine aminotransferase, aspartate aminotransferase, urea nitrogen, creatinine, thyroid stimulating hormone, and insulin-like growth factor were normal. Urinary creatinine and calcium were also normal.

A positron emission tomography with computed tomography (PET/CT) scan revealed foci of increased uptake in the right mandible, left femur, left calcaneous, and left posterior back (Figure 2).

Histopathologic Examination

The lower back nodule was surgically excised. Histopathologic examination was remarkable for a nodular collection of spindle cells without atypia surrounding vascular spaces in the deep dermis extending into the subcutis (Figure 3). The spindle cells surrounded mature lamellar bone in the dermis and did not express CD-31, smooth muscle actin or Factor XIII. These findings are consistent with phosphaturic mesenchymal tumor.¹

Diagnosis

Tumor-induced osteomalacia (TIO) secondary to a subcutaneous phosphaturic mesenchymal tumor, mixed connective tissue type.

Follow-up

Serum FGF-23 levels fell to below normal (5 pg/ml) immediately following surgery, and serum phosphorus and 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D levels normalized within seven days. The patient's muscle strength and pain symptoms improved progressively over the ensuing six months. He now ambulates without assistance and has returned to work.

Discussion

Osteomalacia, or "soft bones," is a term used to describe improperly mineralized osteoid, the bone protein matrix composed primarily of type I collagen. Accumulation of abnormal osteoid results in diffuse bone pain and bone fractures following minimal trauma. Osteomalacia may be congenital or acquired. Congenital causes include X-linked hypophosphatemia (XLH), and autosomal dominant and autosomal recessive hypophosphatemic rickets (ADHR and ARHR). Although the genetic diseases usually present during childhood with rickets, ADHR can occasionally present in adults. Acquired forms of osteomalacia result from inadequate substrate to mineralize osteoid, i.e. calcium or phosphorus. Inadequate ingestion of vitamin D and/or calcium may lead to calcium deficiency, whereas acquired forms of hypophosphatemia almost always reflect renal tubular losses. Acquired renal phosphate wasting may result from renal tubular damage from heavy metals or chemotherapy, fibrous dysplasia of bone, and TIO.² The shared pathway for most forms of renal phosphate wasting, including TIO, involves elevated serum FGF-23.

FGF-23 is a hormone that regulates serum phosphate and 1,25-dihydroxy vitamin D levels at the proximal renal tubule,³ and was discovered as a phosphaturic factor when mutations in the gene encoding FGF-23 were found to be the cause of ADHR.⁴ Subsequently, elevated FGF-23 has been found in patients with TIO,⁵ XLH,⁵ ARHR,⁶ and fibrous dysplasia of bone.⁷ FGF-23 is made by osteocytes⁷ and acts on renal proximal epithelial cells to prevent phosphate reabsorption and conversion of inactive 25-vitamin D to active 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D.⁸

The tetrad of TIO is a very low serum phosphate level, increased urinary phosphate excretion, inappropriately low to low-normal 1, 25-dihydroxy vitamin D levels, and elevated serum FGF-23. Increased FGF-23 in TIO is due to autonomous secretion by tumor cells.⁵ Using the reverse transcriptase-polymerase chain reaction and immunohistochemistry, approximately

80% of tumors in patients with TIO express FGF-23.⁹ Ultrastructural studies using immunogold labeling have localized FGF-23 to the rough endoplasmic reticulum in neoplastic cells,¹⁰ demonstrating that FGF-23 is derived from tumors.

TIO is most commonly associated with slow-growing, benign mesenchymal tumors. Approximately 50% of TIO-associated tumors arise within bone and the other 50% within soft tissues. Regardless of origin of tumors, the lower extremities and craniofacial region are favored locations.¹¹ Histologic features include spindle and oval cells, prominent blood vessels, osteoclast-like giant cells, and a focally mucoid stroma. Cartilaginous and/or metaplastic bone formation is common. Weidner and Santa Cruz classified this heterogeneous group of tumors into four types: phosphaturic mesenchymal tumor, mixed connective tissue type (PMTMCT); osteoblastoma-like tumors; ossifying fibrous-like tumors; and nonossifying fibrous-like tumors.¹ Hemangiopericytoma (HPC) is described as one of the most frequent appearing neoplasms associated with TIO.⁹ However, the current consensus WHO classification of soft tissue tumors discourages use of HPC as a primary diagnosis because HPCs are derived from fibroblasts, rather than pericytes as initially proposed.¹² Histopathologic review of 32 previously reported cases of TIO, including 3 classic HPCs and 24 with HPC-like vessels, led to re-classification of 80% of TIO-associated mesenchymal tumors as PMTMCT.⁹

The diagnosis of TIO can be challenging because laboratory findings can be subtle, and FGF-23 serum levels are not included on routine chemistries nor are they commercially available. Severe hypophosphatemia is an important clue, and should prompt further evaluation of renal phosphate excretion, serum 1,25-dihydroxy vitamin D levels, and the calcium/parathyroid hormone axis. Low urinary reabsorption of phosphorous in the setting of hypophosphatemia and normal serum vitamin D levels is diagnostic. If diagnostic confirmation is needed, bone biopsy demonstrates prominent osteoid formation and unmineralized bone.

Resection of the FGF-23 secreting tumor is curative. A thorough skin examination should be conducted and special consideration paid to any nodule or mass. Since many tumors are small and asymptomatic, extensive imaging studies may be required to identify the source. Imaging studies employed (in order of utility) include octreotide scan (a radionuclide scan using a somatostatin analog), PET/CT, whole-body magnetic resonance imaging, and CT.¹³ In instances in which imaging fails to identify a specific tumor site, regional venous sampling in conjunction with FGF-23 assays been used to confirm tumor location as well as to determine post-surgical response.¹⁴

Patients typically experience rapid improvement in both clinical symptoms and laboratory abnormalities following tumor removal. Even if the tumor cannot be located or is unresectable, treatment with oral replacement of phosphate and vitamin D may provide significant symptomatic benefit.

Key Teaching Points

- Progressive weakness and bone pain in a setting of low serum phosphorous, low-normal 1,25-dihydroxy vitamin D, and increased urinary phosphate should prompt an evaluation for TIO.
- Tumors autonomously secrete FGF-23 which induces wasting of urinary phosphorous, abnormal vitamin D metabolism, and the associated clinical signs of osteomalacia.
- Phosphaturic mesenchymal tumors, mixed connective tissue type, are the most common causes of TIO. Hemangiopericytoma-like features are often observed in these mesenchymal tumors.

- In some cases, causative tumors may be identified by skin exam.
- Complete removal of the tumor is curative.

Acknowledgements

Funding Sources: This research was supported by the Intramural Programs of the NIH, Center for Cancer Research, National Cancer Institute and National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research

Abbreviations

FGF, fibroblast growth factor; PET, positron emission tomography; CT, computed tomography; TIO, tumor induced osteomalacia; XLH, X-linked hypophosphatemia; ADHR, autosomal dominant hypophosphatemic rickets; ARHR, autosomal recessive hypophosphatemic rickets; PMTMCT, phosphaturic mesenchymal tumor, mixed connective tissue type; HPC, hemangiopericytoma.

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Figure 1.
A 1.5 cm very hard non-tender subcutaneous nodule with overlying hyperpigmentation on the left lower back.

Figure 2.
PET/CT scan: A small focus of increased uptake is observed in the skin of the left posterior back near the L3 vertebrae (arrow). The tumor contains areas of calcification as detected on the CT component of the PET/CT scan, suggestive of bone formation.

A **B**

C

Figure 3. Phosphaturic mesenchymal tumor. Nodule comprised of spindle cells, vascular spaces, and bone formation (**A**, Hematoxylin and eosin, 4× magnification). The calcified area is true lamellar bone and is rimmed by spindle cells (**B**, Hematoxylin and eosin, 10× magnification). The cells appear uniform without atypia (**C**, Hematoxylin and eosin, 40× magnification).