

A rare case of immunotherapy-induced hemolytic anemia post-nivolumab

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Purpose

In this case report, we discuss a patient that developed immunotherapy-induced hemolytic anemia after treatment with nivolumab for metastatic lung cancer.

Methods

This case study required a retrospective review of Electronic Health Records and a thorough literature review.

Case

This patient is an 80-year-old female with dementia, history of breast cancer 10 years ago, and history of stage I left upper lobe lung cancer 2 years ago. On April 2022 she underwent routine surveillance imaging studies that showed interval development of hypermetabolic nodules in the right upper lung lobe, right hilar and mediastinal lymphadenopathy, and bone metastases. She underwent an endobronchial ultrasound, and a biopsy showed metastatic adenocarcinoma consistent with lung cancer. Molecular profiling showed that the tumor was negative for PDL-1, EGFR, ROS1, ALK, RET, and MET mutations. She started treatment with nivolumab on May 2022. After 3 cycles of treatment, she reported shortness of breath and fatigue. Laboratory findings showed new onset of normochromic normocytic anemia, elevated reticulocytes, bilirubin and LDH, and low haptoglobin. DAT negative. A peripheral blood smear review showed schistocytes indicated by the black arrows (Figure 1). The patient was admitted to the hospital and transfused. CT scans showed the progression of lung cancer. She elected to go into home hospice.

Immunotherapy has been widely used to treat numerous solid and hematologic malignancies, showing dramatic clinical benefits compared to traditional chemotherapeutics. Antibodies such as nivolumab (a PD-1 inhibitor) target various immune checkpoints, initiating a T-cell anti-tumor response. Drug-induced AIHA (autoimmune hemolytic anemia) may be seen after nivolumab therapy and is commonly mediated through IgG or C3. In this case, the antibody therapy renders the red blood cells as foreign substances, initiating hemolysis throughout the body. Although rare, several hematological severe immune-mediated adverse effects are associated with immunotherapy. Autoimmune hemolytic anemia (AIHA) remains poorly characterized and should be a concern when treating cancer patients with immunotherapy regimens. Based on this patient's clinical presentation, her hemolytic anemia is most likely due to her nivolumab treatment.

Conclusion

Although rare, the risk of immune-mediated hematologic adverse effects should be considered in all patients receiving immunotherapy. Identifying the early signs and symptoms of therapy-related AIHA is vital so the patient can receive appropriate management, such as a high-dose steroid and plasma exchange. Although immunotherapy has drastically improved cancer treatments, it is crucial for healthcare professionals to be familiar with the adverse effects of immunotherapy, allowing healthcare professionals to recognize AIHA better and manage these potentially life-threatening side effects.

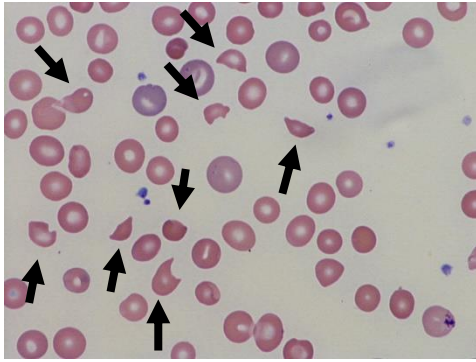


Figure 1. The patient's peripheral blood smear showed numerous schistocytes, consistent with her hemolytic anemia diagnosis secondary to immunotherapy.