Caviar tongue: A lingual physiological variation

Fatima Alaoui, Asmahane Souissi, Fatma Jendoubi, Mourad Mokni

A 78-year-old man with a history of 70 pack-years of cigarettes was diagnosed for squamous cell carcinoma of the right labial commissure. He was referred to our outpatient department for an asymptomatic tortuous swelling on the under surface of the tongue. The condition was evolving since one year with no history of bleeding. Clinical examination found dilated...
tortuous vessels in the undersurface and along lateral portions of the tongue (figure 1). Examination of the skin and the other mucosal surfaces was normal. Dermoscopy showed red lacuna with whitish veil (figure 2). Physical examination showed no other abnormalities. Regarding the clinical and dermoscopic features, diagnosis of lingual varicosities was made. Lingual varicosities—also called caviar tongue—is the most common physiological change of the tongue. It consists in a non-inflammatory dilation of the sublingual veins and affects 10% of the population over the age of 40 years [1]. As in our patient, lingual varicosities appear as soft, red to purple lesions resembling caviar. They are mostly located under the lateral border of the tongue. Lips and buccal mucosae are uncommon sites. Lesions rarely bleed. In case of bleeding, investigations are necessary to underlie conditions responsible of an increased venous pressure such as superior vena cava syndrome or portal hypertension [2].

Dermoscopy of lingual varicosities has been poorly described in the literature. As in our patient, it shows red lacuna with whitish veil in some places [3]. The etiopathological mechanism is poorly known but could be related to changes in the connective tissue, which can be associated with a fragility of the venous wall by senile degeneration of the elastic fibers [4].

Differential diagnoses are hemangioma, kaposi sarcoma or lymphangioma [2]. Vascular lesion on the tongue in a young person can be a part of congenital diseases such as Fabry or Osler syndrome. In our patient, detailed history and clinical examination were not consistent with such diagnoses [4]. Histological examination is not necessary for the diagnosis. If a biopsy is performed, it would show dilated vein with a thick wall and a hypoplastic endothelium without inflammatory lesions [2].

The treatment regimen is sclerotherapy and surgery. Photocoagulation with a high intensity diode laser or a NdYag laser have been also used in unusual locations such as buccal mucosa or the lips [3]. Because the lesions are benign, no active intervention is required.

To conclude, caviar tongue is a physiological manifestation that is frequently unrecognized. Knowing its benignity and its frequency in elderly patients, physicians should avoid useless investigations. Dermoscopy can be considered as a valuable tool in the diagnosis of lingual varicosities.

Disclosure of interest: The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

References