

Mirtazapine-induced akathisia

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TO THE EDITOR: Akathisia is a clinical syndrome that manifests as the subjective sense of unease or restlessness, or observable motor manifestations such as shuffling or tramping movements of the legs and feet, or both.¹ The marked distress associated with akathisia can lead to impulsive suicide attempts.² It is commonly associated with antipsychotic medications, as well as various antidepressants, including tricyclics and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).

Mirtazapine is a novel antidepressant. It acts centrally to increase both noradrenergic and serotonergic neurotransmission. Common side effects include sedation, weight gain and increased appetite. Tremor is listed as an adverse reaction, but this does not represent akathisia. A MEDLINE database search (up to September 2001), using the words "akathisia" and "mirtazapine", did not reveal any reports of an association. However, as of mid-November 2001, the Adverse Drug Reactions Advisory Committee (ADRAC) had received five reports of "hyperkinesia (probably equivalent to akathisia)" associated with mirtazapine.

We would like to report two cases of acute akathisia associated with mirtazapine.

A 52-year-old man was referred by his psychiatrist for inpatient management of his depressive illness. He had previously tried multiple antidepressants, including various tricyclics and SSRIs. However, because of the sexual side effect anorgasmia, adherence to antidepressant treatment was poor. He was prescribed mirtazapine (30 mg at night). Within an hour of taking the first dose, he complained of feeling restless and unable to keep his legs still. He was given 1 mg of clonazepam, which settled his symptoms after 30 minutes. He was also observed to jiggle his legs and feet while at rest. His symptoms recurred the next day, necessitating further successful treatment with clonazepam. Mirtazapine therapy was continued, and the patient's depression improved significantly over the next few days, and the akathisia gradually resolved with regular use of clonazepam.

A 73-year-old woman with chronic depression was admitted after an overdose. Her medications on admission were omeprazole, amiodarone, bendrofluzide and fluvoxamine (50 mg). The fluvoxamine was

changed to mirtazapine (15 mg/day initially, increased to 30 mg/day after three days). After the first 30 mg dose, she described intense restlessness in her legs lasting up to two hours. The distress necessitated reintroducing the fluvoxamine in place of the mirtazapine. Within three weeks the patient was readmitted with depressed mood and suicidal ideation. Mirtazapine (30 mg at night) was reintroduced, with consequent acute return of restless legs. The patient's akathisia settled when the mirtazapine was reduced to 15 mg at night. No additional treatment was required.

The neurobiological basis for akathisia remains unclear. Involvement of central serotonergic and adrenergic neurotransmitter systems has been postulated. One of mirtazapine's main actions is blockade of α_2 -adrenoreceptors. Clonidine, an α_2 -agonist, is effective in treating akathisia.³ We suggest that mirtazapine's adrenoceptor action might be the basis for the occurrence of akathisia in these patients.

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Vitamin D deficiency and multicultural Australia

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TO THE EDITOR: In a recent editorial, Mason and Diamond state that ergocalciferol (vitamin D₂) is bioequivalent to cholecalciferol (vitamin D₃) and that 1000 IU/day of ergocalciferol is sufficient for the treatment of vitamin D deficiency.¹ Both statements are contentious. Although ergocalciferol (vitamin D₂) is the only single prohormonal form of vitamin D available on prescription in Australia, there are three reasons to be cautious about the use and dose equivalence of ergocalciferol (vitamin D₂) compared with cholecalciferol (vitamin D₃).

Cholecalciferol (and not ergocalciferol) has been shown in two randomised trials to reduce fracture rates when administered concomitantly with calcium to elderly patients.^{2,3} Furthermore, all recently studied agents for treating postmenopausal osteoporosis (alendronate, risedronate, raloxifene and parathyroid hormone 1-34 [the first 34 amino acids of the hormone])

were shown to lower fracture rates, but study participants were routinely given supplementary calcium and vitamin D when deficiency was established. At least two studies specified the use of cholecalciferol.

Vitamin D₂ (ergocalciferol) and vitamin D₃ (cholecalciferol) are probably not bioequivalent.^{4,5} Ergocalciferol administration to vitamin-D-replete premenopausal women reduced the amount of circulating 25-hydroxyvitamin D₃ (25OHD₃) while only modestly increasing 25OHD₂ levels, with a resultant marginal effect on the total 25OHD level.⁴ In contrast, the equivalent dose of cholecalciferol increased the circulating level of 25OHD₃ significantly.⁴

Lastly, while radioimmunoassays (RIAs), such as the INCSTAR/DioSorin assay (Stillwater, Minnesota, USA), used in both studies of vitamin D levels published recently in the *MJA*^{6,7} are able to measure 25OHD levels, they are incapable of differentiating between 25OHD₂ and 25OHD₃. Furthermore, neither of the commercially available RIAs (the other one is made by IDS Ltd, Tyne and Wear, UK) is able to measure both vitamin D metabolites with equivalent accuracy. In a study comparing RIAs for the measurement of 25OHD against high performance liquid chromatography (the gold standard method) both assays did not recognise 25OHD₂ as well as 25OHD₃, with r^2 of 0.74 and 0.58, respectively, for 25OHD₂.⁸ Until further research is available, using more patients and a greater number with vitamin D deficiency, caution must be exercised in the interpretation of 25OHD levels measured with RIAs. This applies especially to individuals taking ergocalciferol (vitamin D₂) for the treatment of vitamin D deficiency.

Thus, it would appear that cholecalciferol (vitamin D₃) has a role to play in the reduction of osteoporotic fractures, but only when administered with calcium. If administering ergocalciferol (vitamin D₂), a far greater dose than 1000 IU/day may be needed, and the use of commercial RIAs to determine the therapeutic response may be misleading.

Competing interests: None declared.

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