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Side Effects of Valproic Acid, Causes of Alopecia and Obesity

Abdukahorova Rukhshona Nodirovna
Student of the Faculty of Medicine, Samarkand Medical University

Abdurakhmonova Zamira Ergashboevna
Assistant at the Department of Pharmacology, Samarkand Medical University

Annotation: Valproic acid (VPA) is a widely used antiepileptic drug that has proven effective in controlling seizures and mood disorders. However, its use is often associated with a range of side effects, including alopecia (hair loss) and obesity, which can significantly impact the quality of life of patients. This research article explores the underlying mechanisms and causes of these side effects, focusing on recent findings in clinical and molecular studies. Understanding the causes of alopecia and obesity in patients treated with valproic acid is crucial for developing targeted strategies to mitigate these adverse effects.

Keywords: Valproic acid, alopecia, obesity, antiepileptic drug, mitochondrial toxicity, metabolic pathways, genetic predisposition, insulin resistance, hormone imbalance.

Introduction:

Valproic acid (VPA), a broad-spectrum antiepileptic drug, has been in use since the 1960s and is also commonly prescribed for mood disorders, including bipolar disorder. Despite its effectiveness, VPA is associated with a range of adverse effects, notably alopecia and obesity, which can lead to non-compliance and reduced quality of life in patients. This article aims to delve into the causes of these side effects, examining the biochemical, genetic, and environmental factors involved.

Literature review

Valproic acid (VPA) is a widely used antiepileptic drug known for its efficacy in treating epilepsy, bipolar disorder, and migraines. However, its use is associated with several adverse effects, including alopecia (hair loss) and obesity, which significantly impact patient adherence and quality of life.

Alopecia is a common side effect of VPA, affecting approximately 6-12% of patients, although some studies suggest higher prevalence rates. The hair loss is typically diffuse and reversible upon discontinuation of the drug. The exact mechanism is not fully understood, but research suggests that VPA may induce alopecia through mitochondrial dysfunction, leading to oxidative stress that disrupts the hair follicle cycle (Coppola et al., 2001). Additionally, VPA has been shown to deplete essential nutrients like biotin and selenium, which are critical for hair growth (Emadi-Konjin et al., 2005). Hormonal disruptions, particularly involving thyroid hormones, have also been implicated in VPA-induced alopecia (Isojärvi et al., 2001).

Obesity is another significant side effect, with studies indicating that up to 50% of patients on VPA experience weight gain. This weight gain is primarily due to metabolic alterations, including reduced basal metabolic rate (BMR) and increased lipogenesis (Biton et al., 2003). VPA has also been linked to insulin resistance, which exacerbates weight gain by promoting fat storage (Isojärvi et al., 1998). The disruption of appetite-regulating hormones, such as leptin and ghrelin, further contributes to obesity in patients treated with VPA (Isojärvi et al., 2001).

Management strategies for these side effects include nutritional supplementation for alopecia and lifestyle interventions such as diet and exercise for obesity. In some cases, switching to alternative antiepileptic drugs with a lower risk of these side effects may be necessary (Mula et al., 2012).

Relevance:

The relevance of studying valproic acid-induced alopecia and obesity lies in their significant impact on patient quality of life and treatment adherence. Alopecia can cause psychological distress and social withdrawal, while obesity increases the risk of comorbidities such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Understanding these side effects helps in developing effective management strategies and personalized treatment plans. This knowledge is crucial for improving patient outcomes and reducing the healthcare burden associated with long-term VPA use.

Purpose of the study:

The purpose of this study is to investigate the underlying mechanisms and causes of alopecia and obesity as side effects of valproic acid (VPA) treatment. By exploring the biochemical, genetic, and metabolic factors contributing to these adverse effects, the study aims to enhance the understanding of how VPA impacts hair growth and body weight. The ultimate goal is to provide insights that can inform the development of targeted management strategies, improve patient outcomes, and guide clinicians in making more informed decisions when prescribing VPA, particularly for patients who may be at higher risk for these side effects.

Material or method of research

This study conducted a comprehensive literature review of peer-reviewed articles, clinical trials, and case studies focused on the side effects of valproic acid, specifically alopecia and obesity. Data were sourced from academic databases like PubMed and Scopus, using keywords related to VPA and its side effects. The analysis included studies published between 1990 and 2024. Inclusion criteria required the studies to focus on the biochemical, genetic, or metabolic mechanisms of these side effects, while exclusion criteria filtered out non-peer-reviewed articles and studies not directly related to VPA-induced alopecia or obesity. Data were qualitatively analyzed to identify common themes and insights into the underlying mechanisms and management strategies for these side effects.

Results

The review identified that alopecia affects 6-12% of patients on valproic acid (VPA), primarily due to mitochondrial dysfunction, nutrient deficiencies (biotin, selenium, zinc), and hormonal disruptions. Obesity was found to impact up to 50% of patients, driven by reduced basal metabolic rate, increased fat storage, insulin resistance, and disruptions in appetite-regulating hormones like leptin. These findings highlight the multifactorial causes of VPA-induced alopecia and obesity, emphasizing the need for targeted management strategies.

Conclusion

Valproic acid (VPA) is associated with significant side effects, notably alopecia and obesity, which can impact patient adherence and quality of life. Alopecia is linked to mitochondrial dysfunction, nutrient deficiencies, and hormonal disruptions, while obesity results from metabolic changes, insulin resistance, and hormonal imbalances. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for developing targeted strategies to manage these side effects, improve patient outcomes, and ensure better adherence to VPA therapy.

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