

Differential diagnosis of amiodarone-induced thyrotoxicosis in a patient with atrial fibrillation and agranulocytosis on the background of thyrostatic therapy. Case report

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Abstract

Atrial fibrillation is the most common heart rhythm disorder in patients with chronic heart failure. One of the most effective antiarrhythmic drugs for the treatment and prevention of a wide range of supraventricular and ventricular tachyarrhythmia is amiodarone. In the group of patients with paroxysmal atrial fibrillation and low left ventricular ejection fraction, it is the drug of choice when conducting a „rhythm control“ strategy. Patients receiving amiodarone often develop an adverse event – amiodarone-induced thyrotoxicosis, which exacerbates the course of cardiovascular pathology. In this article, we consider a clinical case of amiodarone-induced thyrotoxicosis in a 30-year-old patient with dilated cardiomyopathy and agranulocytosis that developed against the background of thyrostatic therapy.

Keywords: amiodarone, amiodarone-induced thyrotoxicosis, glucocorticoids, thyroid gland, thyrostatics, agranulocytosis, atrial fibrillation, chronic heart failure

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КЛИНИЧЕСКИЙ СЛУЧАЙ

Дифференциальная диагностика амиодарон-индуцированного тиреотоксикоза у пациентки с фибрилляцией предсердий и агранулоцитозом на фоне тиреостатической терапии

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Аннотация

Фибрилляция предсердий является самым частым нарушением ритма сердца у пациентов с хронической сердечной недостаточностью. Одним из наиболее эффективных антиаритмических препаратов для лечения и профилактики широкого спектра наджелудочковых и желудочковых тахикардий является амиодарон. В группе пациентов с пароксизмальной формой фибрилляции предсердий и низкой фракцией выброса левого желудочка он является препаратом выбора при проведении стратегии «контроля ритма». У пациентов, получающих амиодарон, нередко развивается экстракардиальное нежелательное явление – амиодарон-индуцированный тиреотоксикоз, усугубляющий течение сердечно-сосудистой патологии. В статье представляем клинический случай амиодарон-индуцированного тиреотоксикоза у пациентки 30 лет с дилатационной кардиомиопатией и агранулоцитозом, развившимися на фоне тиреостатической терапии.

Ключевые слова: амиодарон, амиодарон-индуцированный тиреотоксикоз, глюкокортикоиды, щитовидная железа, тиреостатики, агранулоцитоз, фибрилляция предсердий, хроническая сердечная недостаточность

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Introduction

Atrial fibrillation (AF) is the most common heart rhythm disorder in patients with chronic heart failure (CHF). Combined, these two conditions worsen the prognosis by increasing the risk of overall mortality and exacerbating the disease symptoms, including increasing the risk of hospitalizations due to CHF decompensation [1]. The prevalence of AF increases with an increase in the functional class of CHF, reaching 50% or more in patients with functional class IV [2]. In addition, the occurrence of AF in patients who had a sinus rhythm at the time of implantation of the cardiac resynchronizer is a not uncommon cause of loss of treatment effectiveness and the CHF decompensation, which requires compliance with the “rhythm control” strategy. Patients with low left ventricular (LV) ejection fraction (EF) have significant limitations in antiarrhythmic therapy options. Also, despite the availability of clinical guidelines, approaches to treating such patients remain debatable and thus individualized. Comorbidities in such clinical situations will determine the severity of the condition and require multidisciplinary involvement to choose a treatment approach. Amiodarone, a class III antiarrhythmic agent, is one of the most commonly used agents for treating and preventing a wide range of supraventricular and ventricular tachyarrhythmias [3–7]. In the group of patients with paroxysmal AF and low LVEF, amiodarone is the drug of choice for the “rhythm control” strategy [8]. The drug is also used to treat patients with implanted resynchronizers and cardioverter defibrillators. The positive effect of amiodarone has also been demonstrated in the treatment of progressive heart failure due to a minimal negative inotropic effect and a relatively insignificant arrhythmogenic effect [9]. However, it is necessary to consider the possibility of non-cardiac side effects, the probability of which increases with the therapy duration [10].

Patients receiving amiodarone often develop adverse events of amiodarone-induced thyrotoxicosis (AmIT). Its prevalence can be as high as 10–20.5%. AmIT is often indistinguishable from spontaneous thyrotoxicosis; however, clinical signs do not appear in all patients and can be offset by manifestations of heart disease. It can occur both in the early period and several months after the start of therapy and even several months after discontinuation of therapy since amiodarone and its metabolites have a large volume of distribution and a prolonged half-life due to accumulation in some tissues, particularly in adipose tissue. There are two types of AmIT, and making a clear differential diagnosis between them is important because different treatments are required. Often, verifying the AmIT type is extremely difficult for the clinician. Type 1 AmIT (AmIT1) is due to the increased production of thyroid hormones, while AmIT2 is associated with the release of synthesized and accumulated hormones from thyrocytes due to their destruction. AmIT1 is often associated with pre-existing thyroid disorders (multinodular goiter, latent Graves’ disease, etc.), whereas AmIT2 is more common among patients with intact thyroid. The median time of AmIT1 onset is 3.5 months from the start of

therapy, while AmIT2 can occur much later, with a median time of onset of 30 months [11].

Clinical manifestations of AmIT may include fatigue, weight loss, increased sweating, and hand tremor. However, due to the anti-adrenergic activity of amiodarone and its inhibitory effect on the conversion of thyroxine (T4) to triiodothyronine (T3), the described symptoms may be alleviated or completely absent. Cardiovascular manifestations become dominant: deterioration in pre-existing cardiac arrhythmias, increased angina attacks, and the onset or worsening of CHF signs.

The diagnosis of AmIT is based on the determination of thyroid hormone levels; there is a decrease in thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) and an increase in free T3 and free T4, antibodies to the TSH receptor (anti-TSHR-Ab) are usually elevated in patients with AmIT1. Ultrasound (US) examination of the thyroid gland in patients with AmIT1 shows increased blood flow, an increase in the thyroid gland volume, and nodules may be observed, while in patients with AmIT2, the vascularization of the gland is reduced.

Scanning using sodium pertechnetate ^{99m}Tc to assess the absorption capacity of the thyroid gland and determine its functional activity is not always informative since the gland is completely saturated with iodine. Scanning with ^{99m}Tc-sestaMIBI is preferable for the differential diagnosis of AmIT types [12].

Since AmIT can lead to increased hospitalization and mortality of patients, achieving euthyroidism is the primary goal of the clinician. In AmIT1, thyroid hormone synthesis blockers (thiamazole or propylthiouracil) are indicated. However, the use of these drugs is associated with adverse events such as leukopenia and agranulocytosis. As the first line of AmIT2 therapy, glucocorticoids are used, in particular prednisolone, as it has a membrane-stabilizing and anti-inflammatory effect, inhibits the cytolytic effects of amiodarone, and also reduces the conversion of T4 to the more active form, T3, by inhibiting type 1 deiodinase [13].

A clinical case

Patient N., 30 years old, was admitted to the Department of Infectious Disease with suspected COVID-19 in May 2020 with dyspnea, shortness of breath, palpitations, dizziness, and fever up to 38.5°C for 4 days. She had a history (Fig. 1) of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy diagnosed in 2004 at the age of 14 years. In 2015, she had pneumonia complicated by myocarditis. Subsequently, she not-ed periodic edema of the lower extremities and dyspnea during physical exertion. Echocardiography showed a decrease in LVEF up to 30%, and dilated cardiomyopathy was diagnosed. Since 2018, a complete left bundle branch block (LBBB) has been recorded, for which a three-chamber cardioresynchronizer-defibrillator was implanted. In 2019, a paroxysm of tachysystolic AF occurred, medically corrected with amiodarone. The drug was administered continuously to maintain sinus rhythm. Over the past year, repeated paroxysms of AF occurred, controlled by electric cardioversion.

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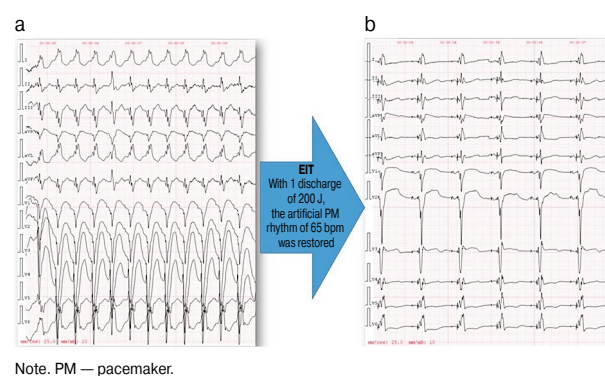
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Fig. 1. Medical history.

2004	2015	2018	2019	2020
She was diagnosed with hypertrophic cardiomyopathy at the age of 14 years	Pneumonia followed by myocarditis and dilated cardiomyopathy	Complete LBBPH; three-chamber cardiac resynchronizer-defibrillator implanted	AF paroxysm, amiodarone 200 mg/day started Thyrotoxicosis detected	Thiamazole 30 mg/day + methylprednisolone 8 mg/day were prescribed Due to suspected COVID-19, the patient was admitted to the Department of Infectious Disease

Fig. 2. Ultrasound of the thyroid gland. The thyroid gland volume was not increased, and a reduced echogenicity of the parenchyma was visualized.**Fig. 3. Electrocardiograms before (a) and after (b) the EIT:** a – AFL with an atrial contraction rate of 271 per minute and a ventricular contraction rate of 2:1; a ventricular contraction rate of 144 per minute; complete LBBPH; b – an artificial rhythm of atrial ventricular stimulation, with a heart rate of 65 beats per minute.

In December 2019, thyrotoxicosis developed during amiodarone therapy. In March 2020, thiamazole 30 mg/day and methylprednisolone 8 mg/day were administered, followed by a dose reduction to 2 mg/day, which the patient continued to take at the time of admission.

Electrocardiography showed atrial flutter (AFL) with a 140–150 bpm heart rate and a complete LBBPH.

Echocardiography showed dilatation and global systolic dysfunction of all heart chambers and a diffuse decrease in the global contractility of the LV myocardium: end-diastolic LV size 64 mm, LV EF ~20–25% (using Simpson method), left atrium 80 mL, TAPSE 9 mm, right ventricular fractional area change 25%, eccentric hypertrophy of the LV myocardium, and signs of high central venous pressure. Complete blood count showed decreased leukocyte levels to 2.3×10^9 (4.8–10.8) and neutrophils to 0.3×10^9 (1.9–8.0). Thyrotoxicosis was laboratory-confirmed: TSH <0.01 mIU/L (0.27–4.2), free T4 73.35 pmol/L (12–22), free T3 6.22 pmol/L (3.1–6.8), anti-TSHR-Ab 6.3 mU/L (0.3–1.75). The thyroid gland ultrasound showed the total volume within normal limits with decreased parenchyma echogenicity and normal vascularization (Fig. 2).

Upon admission, no signs of pneumonia were detected according to chest computed tomography. Negative results of the polymerase chain reaction test for SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) were obtained twice. During the first day of hospital stay, tachysystolic AFL and a pronounced decrease in the global contractile function of the LV, a progressive deterioration of the condition was observed with the rapid decompensation of heart failure. Electro-impulse therapy (EIT) was used with the restoration of the artificial rhythm with atrioventricular stimulation of 68 beats per minute, which contributed to the rapid stabilization of the patient's condition (Fig. 3). Subsequently, during antiarrhythmic therapy with sotalol 320 mg/day, arrhythmia did not recur. According to current clinical guidelines, basic therapy was used for patients with CHF, including angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors, mineralocorticoid receptor antagonists, and loop diuretics [14]. During the therapy, heart failure compensation was achieved.

A patient with suspected viral pneumonia was diagnosed with agranulocytosis, and therefore, thiamazole therapy was discontinued for the treatment of life-threatening conditions, and prednisolone was started at a dose of 30 mg/day. A serial complete blood count after 3 days showed an improvement; leukocytes and neutrophils increased; therefore, it was decided against using hematopoietic stimulants.

Thyroid hormone levels subsequently normalized. In 2020, at the Shumakov Federal Research Center of Transplantology and Artificial Organs, orthotopic heart transplantation and a pacemaker explantation were performed using the bicaval technique and cardiopulmonary bypass. After the surgery, the patient received monitoring, standard cardiovascular therapy, and immunosuppression. By December 2023, the patient's condition was stable; the graft function was satisfactory, and the expected clinical effect was achieved: tolerance to physical activity increased, the general condition improved significantly, and euthyroidism persisted.

Discussion

When diagnosing AmIT, it is crucial to determine its type, which is a decisive factor in the choice of therapy. For this purpose, radioisotope scanning (thyroid scintigraphy) is usually used. However, it is not always possible to reliably determine the

nature of the process in the thyroid tissue. Considering the low effectiveness of thyrostatic therapy (the continuing increased level of free T4 during thiamazole therapy at 30 mg for 2 months, the reduced echogenicity of the thyroid parenchyma, and the absence of increased vascularization according to ultrasound, despite the increased level of anti-TSHR-Ab), the patient's condition was regarded as AmIT2 (destructive thyroiditis). The lack of improvement during glucocorticosteroid therapy at the beginning of treatment is most likely due to the insufficient dose of the drug and its early withdrawal.

Possible causes of agranulocytosis include the myelotoxic effect of thiamazole since its use in patients with Graves' disease leads to agranulocytosis in 0.2–0.5% of cases [15] and concomitant viral infection. The detection of anti-TSHR-Ab in patients with AmIT does not necessarily indicate hypofunction of the thyroid gland and can be observed in patients with a destructive type of AmIT [16].

The absence of signs of pneumonia according to computed tomography, as well as the twice-negative result of the polymerase chain reaction test for SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19), further confirmed the concept that the clinical symptoms developed in the patient were due to progression of heart failure, and not viral pneumonia. After successful cardioversion, the patient was able to effectively maintain sinus rhythm during sotalol therapy. The "rhythm control" strategy stabilized hemodynamic parameters and achieved compensation for CHF. Given the critical decrease in the systolic function of the heart during the most tolerated drug therapy and the extremely high risk of fatal events, it was decided to perform a heart transplant. This approach is preferred since, despite the modern possibilities of drug therapy, the only radical method of treating the terminal stage of CHF is orthotopic heart transplantation, i.e., transplantation of a donor's heart into the recipient's chest after removal of the affected heart.

The bicaval technique was chosen for our patient due to several advantages that affect overall survival. In particular, this method provides better preservation of the morphology and function of the right atrium, thereby reducing the frequency of atrial dilation, the need for electrical stimulation, and the occurrence of supraventricular arrhythmias and tricuspid regurgitation [17].

Conclusion

In real-world clinical practice, the combination of AF and CHF is always extremely unfavorable, especially in comorbid patients. AmIT is a challenging diagnostic and therapeutic task, especially in patients with comorbidities. Combination therapy with glucocorticoids and thyrostatics is often used to treat undiagnosed forms of AmIT, which can be associated with complications such as agranulocytosis. This clinical case demonstrates the challenges of verifying the thyrotoxicosis type and choosing an optimal approach for managing patients with severe comorbidities.

The involvement of an interdisciplinary team helped choose the optimal treatment promptly and achieve the desired clinical effect.

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data for the work, drafting and revising the work, final approval of the version to be published and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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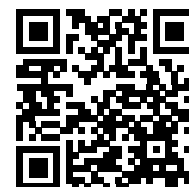
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