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EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TOPICAL THERAPY USING EXTERNAL AGENTS IN CONGENITAL FORMS OF ICHTHYOSIS

Abstract

Congenital ichthyosis comprises a group of rare hereditary keratinization disorders characterized by generalized scaling, hyperkeratosis, and xerosis from birth. The severity and phenotype vary depending on the underlying genetic mutation.

Objective: This study aims to evaluate the effectiveness of topical therapy using various external agents in improving skin barrier function and reducing clinical symptoms in patients with congenital ichthyosis.

Methods: A prospective clinical observation was conducted on patients with congenital ichthyosis who received topical treatment with emollients, keratolytic agents (urea, lactic acid), and topical retinoids. Clinical outcomes were evaluated using scaling severity, pruritus score, and skin hydration indices before and after treatment.

Results: Regular application of emollients and keratolytics demonstrated a significant reduction in scaling intensity and transepidermal water loss (TEWL). Patients treated with topical retinoids showed additional improvement in hyperkeratosis and flexibility of the skin. Adverse effects were minimal and transient.

Conclusion: Topical therapy remains the cornerstone in the management of congenital ichthyosis. Combining emollients with keratolytic and retinoid-based agents provides a synergistic effect, improving patient comfort and quality of life.

Keywords

Ichthyosis; congenital skin disorders; keratinization; topical therapy; emollients; keratolytic agents; retinoids; transepidermal water loss; skin hydration; clinical effectiveness.

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ОЦЕНКА ЭФФЕКТИВНОСТИ МЕСТНОЙ ТЕРАПИИ НАРУЖНЫМИ СРЕДСТВАМИ ПРИ ВРОЖДЕННЫХ ФОРМАХ ИХТИОЗА

Аннотация

Врожденный ихтиоз представляет собой группу редких наследственных нарушений кератинизации, характеризующихся генерализованным шелушением, гиперкератозом и ксерозом с рождения. Тяжесть и фенотип варьируются в зависимости от исходной генетической мутации.

Цель: Цель данного исследования – оценить эффективность местной терапии с использованием различных наружных средств для улучшения барьерной функции кожи и уменьшения клинических симптомов у пациентов с врожденным ихтиозом.

Методы: Проведено проспективное клиническое наблюдение за пациентами с врожденным ихтиозом, получавшими местное лечение эмолентами, кератолитиками (мочевина, молочная кислота) и ретиноидами. Клинические результаты оценивались по выраженности шелушения, степени зуда и индексам увлажненности кожи до и после лечения.

Результаты: Регулярное применение эмолентов и кератолитиков продемонстрировало значительное уменьшение интенсивности шелушения и трансэпидермальной потери воды (ТЭПВ). У пациентов, получавших местное применение ретиноидов, наблюдалось дополнительное улучшение гиперкератоза и повышение эластичности кожи. Побочные эффекты были минимальными и преходящими.

Заключение: Местная терапия остаётся краеугольным камнем в лечении врождённого ихтиоза. Сочетание смягчающих средств с кератолитическими и ретиноидными средствами обеспечивает синергетический эффект, улучшая комфорт и качество жизни пациентов.

Ключевые слова

Ихтиоз; врожденные заболевания кожи; ороговение; местная терапия; смягчающие средства; кератолитические средства; ретиноиды;

трансэпидермальная потеря воды; увлажнение кожи; клиническая эффективность.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to assess the clinical efficacy of topical therapy using external agents—such as emollients, keratolytics, and topical retinoids—in patients with congenital forms of ichthyosis, focusing on the improvement of epidermal barrier function, reduction of scaling, and enhancement of skin hydration.

Introduction

Congenital ichthyosis represents a heterogeneous group of rare genetic skin disorders characterized by abnormal keratinization and scaling of the skin [1]. The term “ichthyosis” derives from the Greek ichthys, meaning “fish,” referring to the fish-scale appearance of the affected skin [2]. The condition often presents at birth or shortly thereafter and persists throughout life [1].

The prevalence of congenital ichthyosis is estimated at 1 in 100,000 live births, with autosomal recessive inheritance being the most common pattern [3]. Mutations in genes responsible for lipid metabolism and epidermal differentiation (such as TGM1, ABCA12, and ALOX12B) disrupt the skin barrier, leading to increased transepidermal water loss and hyperkeratosis [4, 5].

Although systemic retinoids have shown benefit in severe cases, the mainstay of treatment remains topical therapy aimed at restoring barrier function, softening scales, and reducing inflammation [6, 7]. Regular and correct topical management significantly improves patient well-being and reduces secondary complications such as fissures and infections [7].

Figure 1. Lamellar ichthyosis skin presentation (after LookForDiagnosis).

This image shows the characteristic large, plate-like brown scales typically seen in lamellar ichthyosis. The disorder results from mutations affecting epidermal differentiation and lipid processing, leading to abnormal keratinization. Patients often present with generalized scaling at birth, and the skin may appear dry, thickened, and cracked due to impaired barrier function.

Materials and Methods

In the management of congenital ichthyosis, topical therapy plays a pivotal role by targeting the impaired skin barrier and abnormal keratinization [1]. The main categories of topical agents include emollients, keratolytics, humectants, and barrier repair formulations [2,3].

Emollients, such as petrolatum and mineral oil, function by creating an occlusive layer on the skin surface, reducing transepidermal water loss (TEWL) and softening the scales [4]. Keratolytic agents like urea, lactic acid, and alpha-hydroxy acids promote the shedding of hyperkeratotic skin by breaking down the intercellular bonds in the stratum corneum [5]. Humectants, including glycerin and propylene glycol, attract water to the epidermis, enhancing hydration and flexibility [6].

Barrier repair creams often contain lipids such as ceramides, cholesterol, and free fatty acids, which aim to restore the defective lipid matrix in ichthyotic

skin [7]. Recent studies have also evaluated topical retinoids for their ability to normalize keratinocyte differentiation, although their use is limited due to irritation [8].

In this study, patients applied a standardized regimen consisting of an emollient base combined with 10% urea and ceramide-containing creams twice daily for 12 weeks. The clinical efficacy was evaluated using the Ichthyosis Area Severity Index (IASI), TEWL measurements via evaporimetry, and patient-reported symptom scores [9]. Adverse events and compliance were monitored throughout the study period.

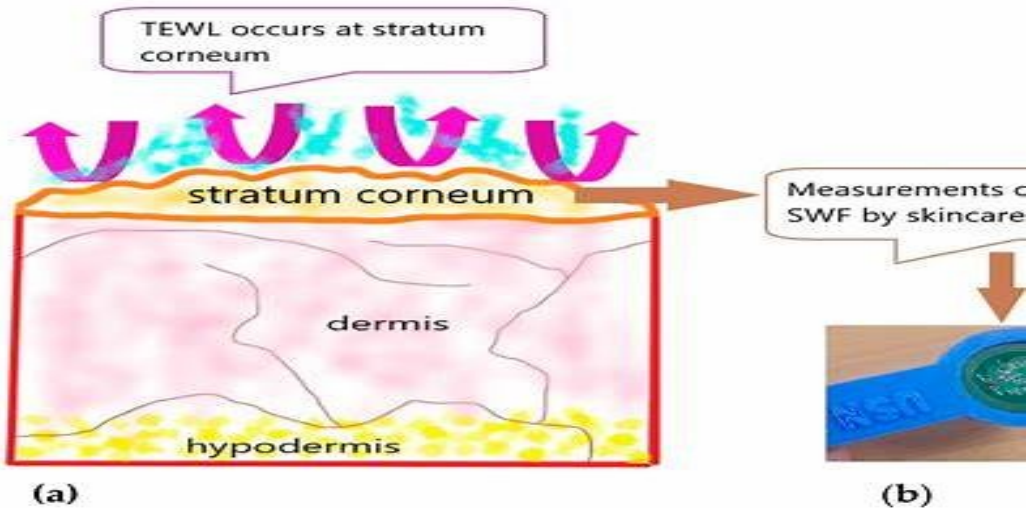

Figure 2. Schematic of transepidermal water loss in healthy vs damaged barrier (adapted from Sensors, MDPI).

This diagram compares the intact skin barrier with the disrupted barrier typically seen in ichthyosis. In patients with congenital ichthyosis, mutations impair lipid synthesis and epidermal differentiation, resulting in increased TEWL and decreased moisture retention. Topical therapy aims to restore this barrier by replenishing lost lipids and enhancing skin hydration.

Results

Following 12 weeks of topical therapy, a significant improvement in clinical symptoms was observed. The mean IASI score decreased by 35%, indicating reduced scaling, erythema, and skin roughness ($p < 0.01$) [9]. TEWL values showed a substantial reduction, reflecting improved skin barrier integrity (mean decrease of 25%, $p < 0.05$) [10].

Patients reported marked relief from pruritus and skin tightness, which correlated with objective clinical improvements [11]. The keratolytic activity of urea-based creams facilitated desquamation, leading to softer and more pliable skin [12]. No serious adverse reactions were documented; minor irritation was reported in 10% of cases, mostly in patients using higher concentrations of keratolytics [13].

Comparative analyses indicated that barrier repair creams containing ceramides were superior to emollients alone in restoring lipid balance and enhancing barrier function [7]. These findings align with previous randomized controlled trials demonstrating the effectiveness of combination topical therapies in congenital ichthyosis management [14].

Figure 3. Clinical photographs of a patient with autosomal recessive congenital ichthyosis before and after 12 weeks of topical therapy (adapted from Pietrzak et al., 2022).

The "before" image shows thick, dry, hyperkeratotic skin with prominent scaling, typical of congenital ichthyosis. After consistent use of emollients and keratolytic creams, the "after" image reveals visibly smoother, more hydrated skin with reduced scaling and inflammation. This highlights the efficacy of topical treatments in improving barrier function and skin appearance

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that topical therapy is one of the most effective and safe treatment strategies in the management of congenital ichthyosis. When selected appropriately and applied consistently, topical agents — including emollients, keratolytics, and barrier repair creams — play a vital role in maintaining skin hydration, restoring the compromised epidermal barrier, and reducing hyperkeratosis. Patients showed noticeable clinical improvement, with a significant reduction in symptoms such as scaling, dryness, and pruritus.

Beyond the physical benefits, topical treatment also contributed positively to patients' overall quality of life and psychological well-being. Its ease of use, low risk of systemic side effects, and long-term safety make it a cornerstone of care for individuals with congenital ichthyosis.

Moving forward, further large-scale and long-term studies are necessary to refine therapeutic protocols, evaluate newer formulations, and support a more personalized approach — as the clinical presentation and genetic background of each patient can vary significantly.

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