

Medicinal Leeches Helped Save Boy's Outer Ear, Glans Penis

BY ROBERT FINN
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SAN FRANCISCO — Medicinal leeches proved useful in saving tissue on a young boy's outer ear and glans penis, according to a presentation by Dr. Adam J. Mamelak at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Dermatology.

Dr. Mamelak, of the department of dermatology at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, described the case of a 5-year-old white boy who presented with a 1-month history of gastroenteritis, abdominal pain, and weight loss. He had swelling on his face and genitals 24 hours before presenting to the emergency department.

His past medical history included gastroschisis with multiple GI surgeries, but he was left with severe gastric dysmotility, chronic bowel obstruction, and bacterial overgrowth.

On exam, he had significant right facial swelling and purple discoloration of the helix of his left ear and his glans penis. This discoloration extended down the penile shaft and onto the scrotum.

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A biopsy of the child's left ear showed multiple fibrin thrombi within the dermal vessels and necrosis of the vessel walls. Following an extensive work-up, he received a diagnosis of disseminated

intravascular coagulation with purpura fulminans.

He also had generalized colitis, but was too unstable for endoscopy. Antibiotics were started and the coagulopathy was treated aggressively, but the medical team continued to worry that he was at increased risk for tissue loss, particularly on the affected areas of the skin.

"So, of course, leech therapy was recommended," Dr. Mamelak said.

Leeches work by providing a mechanism of drainage for congested tissue and also serve as an anticoagulant. Together, this improves perfusion to affected tissue.

The medical team placed leeches on the boy's ear and penis. New leeches were applied every 2-4 hours for a total of 60 hours. Close monitoring is necessary both during and after the procedure, because of a risk of prolonged bleeding with leech therapy.

Five days after the leeches were removed, the necrosis and discoloration were far more limited than before. One month later, necrosis was limited to the tip of the penis and the helical rim of his ear.

Dr. Mamelak provided some hints for the safe use of leeches in dermatology. "Leeches can migrate, and therefore must be watched," he said. "They are somewhat free willed, so they might not do what you want them to do. There's a chance of infection, and pseudolymphoma reactions

have been reported. [And] there could be prolonged bleeding and blood loss. This is particularly important for wound healing, in patients with chronic disorders, and also in people who might have religious objections or other types of objections to blood transfusions, which are frequently required after using leeches. They should be avoided in patients with arterial insufficiency." ■



A leech was applied to the penis of the patient and to other affected areas of the skin. The leeches were changed every 2-4 hours, and applied for a total of 60 hours.

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