An Affordable Alternative to Treating a Case of Chronic Debilitating Diarrhea

Introduction

Bile acid malabsorption (BAM) is a condition that causes chronic and often debilitating diarrhea that is caused by poor reabsorption of bile acids in the GI tract. It is not often acknowledged or tested for in the United States. The selenium homotaurocholic acid seven-day retention test (SeHCAT) is the gold standard for diagnosis that is commonly performed in Europe, but it is not readily available in the US as the Isotopes used are not FDA approved (1). Review of the literature reveals that studies have shown that up to 1% of the general population may have bile acid malabsorption syndromes and approximately 30% of patients given the diagnosis of Irritable bowel syndrome with diarrhea (IBS-D) may instead have BAM (2). If true, this would serve as a fairly sizeable population of patients who would potentially benefit a great deal from a cheap trial of medication as an affordable alternative to extensive and costly referrals, laboratory studies, expensive procedures and procedural evaluations.

Case Description

This is the case of a 70 year old female presenting to the primary care clinic with approximately 15 years of chronic diarrhea. Reported 10-15 lose stools per day over this time period with intermittent worsening. Prior gastroenterologist evaluation earlier in the year labeled her with the diagnosis of IBS-D and mild diverticulosis. She had been told that there was nothing else to be done at that time, and that she would have to live with her symptoms. She also failed Viberzi, a common IBS-D medication, due to intolerable side effects soon after. Her episodes would frequently occur suddenly and unexpectedly which often restricted her to her own home for fear of public accidents. This poor quality of life generated a significantly worsening depression pushing the patient to seek further medical help.

PMH: Fibromyalgia, PTSD, Depression, Hypothyroidism, GERD

PSH: 2 C-sections ~30 years ago, otherwise no prior abdominal surgeries

FH: Non contributory

Ros: Negative aside from worsening depression and IBS-D symptoms.

PE: Cardiac, Lung, and abdominal exams all normal at time of encounter.

Labs: CBC, CMP, TSH - All normal and non contributory

Other studies: Colonoscopy 10 months prior showed sigmoid diverticulitis, negative biopsies for microscopic colitis, questionably decreased sphincter tone, non-bloody internal hemorrhoids, otherwise normal

Conclusion

Chronic diarrhea can be a debilitating and socially crippling condition with extensive psychological ramifications. More research is necessary in this field, but this case and the literature show that even without readily available testing for BAM bile acid sequestrating medications such as Colestipol and its cousins, Cholestyramine and Colesevelam, should be considered for empiric treatment of chronic diarrhea as affordable alternatives to further invasive procedures and expensive medications (3).

Bile acid malabsorption is a documented cause of chronic diarrhea that may be misdiagnosed as IBS-D, and it needs more awareness and research in the American medical community as well as developing more readily available testing and treatment options (3).

References


(4) Camilleri M. Bile Acid diarrhea: prevalence, pathogenesis, and therapy. Aliment. Pharmacol. Ther

(5) Marc Kaplan, D.O. Program Director

1. Midwestern University

2. Canyon Vista Medical Center, Family Medicine Residency

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Other studies continued:

CT abdomen w/o contrast: no acute process

After reviewing the literature regarding BAM, as well as dosing and affordability of medication options, the patient was started on Colestipol 2g PO 1-2 times per day as tolerated with immediate marked relief. She reported having no loose stools starting the next day after beginning the medication. On follow up visits 1 and 2 months later she reported continued relief with far fewer and more manageable (2-4) episodes on her worst days.

Images 1 and 2 are screenshots from GoodRx.com showing out of pocket cost comparison for Colestipol and Viberzi as available from local pharmacies with a GoodRx coupon for context of price and general affordability.

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4413966/

https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1586/egh.09.49


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