DEMODICOSIS AMONG UNIVERSITY MEDICAL STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA AND THE EFFECTS OF FACIAL CLEANSER AND MOISTURIZER USAGE

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Abstract. Demodicosis is an infestation of the skin with Demodex, an ectoparasite commonly found on the face. A cross-sectional study was conducted to detect the presence of the ectoparasite and the outcome of facial cleanser and moisturizer usage on its infestation. Universal sampling was performed among 390 medical students, age 20-25 years old in the Klang Valley of Malaysia. The biodata of the participants and information on the use of facial cleanser and moisturizer were obtained through questionnaire. Skin samples were obtained using both skin scraping and cellophane tape method and were subsequently examined directly by microscopy. The results show an overall prevalence of 17.2%. Males (21.5%) were affected more often than females (12.8%) \((p=0.022)\). There were no significant differences in the prevalence of the ectoparasite among different ethnic groups, age-groups and the presence of existing facial problems among the subjects. A lower infestation rate (11.45%) was found to be associated with the use of a moisturizer \((p=0.033)\). Both species of ectoparasites that infest man, Demodex folliculorum and D. brevis, were detected in this study either as single or mixed infestations.

Keywords: Demodex folliculorum, Demodex brevis, demodicosis, skin scraping, cellophane tape, moisturizer

INTRODUCTION

Demodicosis is infestation with an ectoparasitic mite known as Demodex, among the smallest of arthropods. Many species of Demodex are known to infest mammals worldwide; D. folliculorum and D. brevis are the two species commonly found on humans. The former inhabits the hair follicles while the latter lives in sebaceous glands connected to hair follicles. Both are usually found around the face, specifically on the nose and in the malar area. However, they can be found elsewhere on the body (Roihu and Kariniemi, 1998).

The mobility of the mite is facilitated by the scales covering its body surface. Hair follicles are the center for most of its activities, including mating and feeding on skin-cells, hormones and oils (sebum).
The effective digestive system results in little waste being produced by the ectoparasite. Therefore, no excretory orifices are required. Like most ectoparasites, the Demodex mite is nocturnally active. It travels around on the face and migrates from follicle to follicle especially during the night (Rufli and Mumcoglu, 1981).

Both male and female mites have a genital opening. Mating and reproduction occur at the hair follicle opening. The eggs are laid in the follicles. The six-legged larvae hatch after a few days and grow into the adult stage within a week. The life cycle completes after several weeks. Decomposition of the dead ectoparasite occurs in the hair follicles.

Infestation with Demodex often causes few problems, but its number can rapidly increase, especially when the host is immunologically suppressed (Yagdiran and Aytekin, 2007). Most patients are not aware of the infestation until they have certain facial skin disorders. A diagnosis is usually made only when the patient seeks help from a dermatologist who is knowledgeable about the problems caused by this particular ectoparasite. The common clinical signs and symptoms are facial itching, redness, papules and pustules (Anonymous, 2004). Other symptoms include nonspecific erythema, pityriasisiform squamous lesions, acneiform, granulomatous rosacea-like and perioral dermatitis-like symptoms (Karincauglu et al, 2004). The first documented case of Demodex infestation in Malaysia was manifested only by dryness and scaly skin (Jeffery et al, 1983). Blepharitis is also known to be associated with demodicosis (Heacock, 1986; Fulk and Clifford, 1990; Fulk et al, 1996).

Hu and Wang (2001) reported a positive correlation between demodicosis and facial problems. Ljubojević et al (2002) suggested the mite may have provoked an inflammatory or allergic reaction by impeding the hair follicles. It is possible the ectoparasite may serve as a vector for microorganisms that cause skin problems. Healthy individuals are sometimes positive for mite infestation, therefore it is thought facial problems only manifest when the ectoparasite is present in abundance on the face. Sabine et al (2007) investigated the effect of facial moisturizer use on demodicosis. They found moisturizers helped to re-establishing a skin barrier and significantly reduced skin dryness, roughness and desquamation due to the infestation.

As facial problems are common among teenagers and young adults, our study aimed to determine the prevalence of demodicosis among young adults, and the relationship between regular use of facial moisturizer and the infestation. Our study included subjects who presented with any one of the symptoms reported in previous studies of the clinical manifestations of this ectoparasite (Ljubojević et al, 2002; Anonymous, 2004; Karincauglu et al, 2004; Yagdiran and Aytekin, 2007).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This cross-sectional study was conducted on 390 medical students aged 20-25 years in Klang Valley, Malaysia, and included 195 males and 195 females. The sample size was determined using the formula by Kish (1965). Universal sampling was used.

A self-directed, closed ended questionnaire was used. The variables studied were gender, age, ethnic group, and information about facial problems, facial cleanser and moisturizer usage.
Both skin scrapings and scotch-tape cellophane methods were used on each subject. Samples were obtained by scraping the left side of the nose and malar area with a No. 21 scalpel blade after cleaning the area with sterile water. Each skin scraping was then transferred to a microscope slide, which was then mixed with Hoyer’s medium. Cover slip was then applied for later examination.

For the scotch-tape cellophane method, a sample from each subject was obtained by pasting and pressing firmly the cellophane tape on the right side of the nose and malar area after cleaning the area with sterile water. The tape was then removed and applied to a microscope slide for immediate examination.

A light microscope was used to detect the presence of ectoparasites from both skin scrapings and cellophane tape samples. All samples were examined by the first author and trained laboratory technologists. A positive case was defined as the presence of any developmental stage of Demodex ectoparasite either as an adult, nymph or ova, in samples either from skin scrapings or cellophane tape.

All data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17. A chi-square test was used to analyze the association between the variables of the study where a \( p \)-value<0.05 was considered significant.

The study protocol was approved by the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Research Ethical Committee. Informed written consent was obtained from each subject.

**RESULTS**

Of the 390 subjects studied, 67% (262/390) were 20-22 years old, and 33% (128/390) were 23-25 years old. Fifty-eight percent (226) were Malays, 34% (132) were Chinese and 8% (32) were Indians. About 78% of subjects (305) used facial cleanser

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Total number</th>
<th>Number positive (%)</th>
<th>( p )-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>42 (21.54%)</td>
<td>0.022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>25 (12.82%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-22 years old</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>44 (16.79%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23-25 years old</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>23 (17.97%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>36 (15.93%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>23 (17.42%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>8 (25.00%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used facial cleanser</td>
<td>305</td>
<td>47 (15.41%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not use facial cleanser</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>20 (23.53%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used moisturizer</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>15 (11.45%)</td>
<td>0.033</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not use moisturizer</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>52 (20.07%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had facial problem</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>50 (17.54%)</td>
<td>NS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not have facial problem</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>17 (16.19%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NS, not significant (\( p > 0.05 \))
and 33% (131) used moisturizer for facial care. The majority of the students (73%) had facial problems.

Of the 390 subjects examined, 17.2% (67) were infested with Demodex sp, either by a single or two different species. Demodex infestation was significantly more common in males (1.7 times) \( (p=0.022) \) than females (Table 1). Prevalence of infestation among 20-22 year olds was slightly lower than 23-25 year olds but the difference was not significant \( (p>0.05) \).

The prevalence of demodicosis was slightly higher among Indian study subjects than Chinese and Malay subjects, but the difference was not significant.

There was no association between the use of facial cleanser and Demodex infestation \( (p>0.05) \). There was a significant association between moisturizer use and Demodex infestation \( (p=0.33) \). Subjects who used moisturizers had a lower infestation rate than those who did not. There was no significant association between facial problems of the subjects and the presence of demodicosis.

The majority of subjects (92.5%) were infested by one species of Demodex. The dominant species was Demodex folliculorum (61.2%) followed by Demodex brevis (31.3%). Mixed infestation with both species was observed in 7.5% of infested subjects.

DISCUSSION

The overall prevalence of demodicosis in this study was 17.2%, which is slightly lower than the prevalence of 18.9% reported by Chew et al (2010). This difference may be attributed to a difference in the academic background of the study subjects. In the present study, the study subjects were exclusively medical students who might be more aware of the causal relationship between pathogens and disease, and were more likely to pay more attention to their personal hygiene.

The higher infestation rate among male students in our study in accordance with a study by Chew et al (2010) involving adults 20-29 years old in Malaysia, and by Hu and Wang (2001) in Inner Mongolia, where the infestation rate in the male subjects was about twice that of females. The higher prevalence of demodicosis in the male population may be attributed to the fact that men are generally more active throughout the day which may result in the secretion of more sebum and sweat. Men tend not to use facial moisturizers routinely. The combination of these two factors may have contributed to their susceptibility to infestation.

A study by Aycan et al (2007) found that as a person ages, the prevalence of demodicosis increases. Our study found students in the older age group (23-25) had a slightly higher prevalence of demodicosis than the younger age-group.

Of the three ethnic groups in our study, Indians had a slightly higher infestation rate. There is paucity of data regarding the prevalence of demodicosis among the three ethnic groups. We obtained samples from subjects based on their population distribution in Malaysia. The small sample size of Indian subjects might not be significant enough to represent the actual population. Therefore, we suggest future epidemiological studies should be conducted with larger sample sizes from each ethnic group to determine the distribution of demodicosis among the ethnic groups.

Fabienne et al (2005) suggested cleaning the face with cleanser or soap twice daily could reduce demodicosis. The use
of a facial cloth with a chemical agent in
the soap was thought to be the mechanism
to prevent or control the infestation. Nev-
evertheless, our study showed no significant
association between the daily usage of
facial cleanser and prevalence of demodic-
cosis. We did not take into consideration
the ingredients of facial cleansers used by
our study subjects; some of these facial
skin care products contain only the usual
ingredients of soap, whereas others may
include acaricidal agents.

In our study, we found that there
was a significant association between the
usage of moisturizer and the lower preva-
lence of demodicosis. For those who used
moisturizer, they were less likely to be
infested with mites. We think moisturizers
might create a physical barrier to protect
against mite infestation. It is possible cer-
tain moisturizers may contain acaricidal
chemical agents.

Contrary to previous studies (Hu
and Wang, 2001; Ljubojeviæ et al, 2002),
our study did not show a significant as-
sociation between facial problems and
the prevalence of demodicosis. This can
be explained by the fact that besides De-
modex infestation, the cause of facial prob-
lems may be multi-factorial, including
environmental, hormonal, and personal
hygiene. As such, other factors may have
been more decisive in causing facial skin
conditions.

Similar to a study by Roihu and
Kariniemi (1998), the species of Demodex
we identified were D. folliculorum and D.
brevis. Most of subjects found infected in
the present study had D. folliculorum, fol-
lowed by D. brevis and mixed infection.
Besides the likelihood of being the more
dominant species, the higher prevalence
of D. folliculorum may be explained by its
localization on the superficial layers of the
skin, and are much more easily isolated
with superficial skin scrapings and cel-
lophane tape.

In conclusion, males were more likely
to be infested with Demodex ectoparasite.
Although facial cleanser did not signifi-
cantly reduce the prevalence of demodic-
cosis, facial moisturizers seemed to be
associated with a lower infestation rate.
Future studies are required to look into
the role of moisturizers and the specific
mechanisms of prevention and control of
infestations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors thank the following in-
dividuals for their technical assistance:
Ismail Mohd Ghauth, Aisah Mohd Yunus,
Ahmad Firdaus Mohd Salleh, Fatmah
Md Salleh, Mekadina Bernadus, Nuraffi-
fini Ghazali, Noraina Abd Rahim, Abdul
Rahim Sohadi and Yusof Suboh. We are
grateful to Dr Chan Boon Tek Eugene for
the language help. We would like to ex-
press our gratitude to all the subjects who
volunteered for the study. This study was
supported by the UKMMC Fundamental

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