Received: 13 April.	Revised: 15 May. 2024	Accepted: 30 June. 2024

Review Article

FSSC
The Gift of Healing

ROLE OF SEBORRHEIC DERMATITIS IN ANDROGENIC ALOPECIA

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FUNDING INFORMATION:
Not Applicable

How to cite this article:
Rane S, More P, Tare S., Role of seborrheic dermatitis in androgenic alopecia. 2024;1(1):1-9

ABSTRACT:

Seborrheic dermatitis (SD) and androgenic alopecia (AGA) are two prevalent scalp conditions that significantly impact hair health. SD is a chronic inflammatory disorder characterized by erythema, scaling, and itching, primarily in sebaceous gland-rich areas (1). AGA, commonly known as male or female pattern baldness, is a hereditary condition driven by dihydrotestosterone (DHT)-mediated follicular miniaturization (2). Although these conditions are distinct, emerging research indicates a potential interplay between them. SD-induced inflammation, increased sebum production, and *Malassezia* colonization may exacerbate AGA by disrupting the hair growth cycle (3). Furthermore, oxidative stress and immune dysregulation in SD can accelerate follicular miniaturization (4). This article explores the pathophysiological links between SD and AGA, emphasizing inflammation, sebaceous activity, and microbial involvement. Understanding this relationship is crucial for developing integrated treatment strategies. Current therapeutic approaches, including antifungals, corticosteroids, and systemic antiandrogens, show promise in managing both conditions (5). However, more research is needed to establish targeted interventions. By addressing SD-related inflammation and sebum dysregulation, it may be possible to mitigate AGA progression, offering better outcomes for patients experiencing both conditions. This review synthesizes existing literature, highlights key findings, and proposes future research directions to enhance clinical management of SD and AGA.

KEYWORDS

Alopecia, androgenic alopecia, inflammation, Malassezia, pathophysiology, scalp disorders, sebaceous glands, seborrheic dermatitis, sebum, treatment

INTRODUCTION

Seborrheic dermatitis (SD) is a common inflammatory skin disorder that primarily affects sebaceous gland-rich areas such as the scalp, face, and upper trunk (6). It manifests as greasy scales, erythema, and pruritus, often in response to overactive sebaceous glands and microbial colonization (7). The primary etiological factor associated with SD is the overgrowth of *Malassezia* species, a genus of lipophilic yeasts that thrive in sebum-rich environments (8). In addition to microbial factors, genetic predisposition, hormonal influences, and immune dysregulation contribute to the pathogenesis of SD (9).

Androgenic alopecia (AGA), on the other hand, is a progressive form of hair loss characterized by the miniaturization of hair follicles (10). This condition predominantly affects genetically predisposed individuals and is mediated by the androgen hormone dihydrotestosterone (DHT) (11). DHT binds to androgen receptors in hair follicles, triggering a cascade of events that shorten the anagen (growth) phase and prolong the telogen (resting) phase, ultimately leading to hair thinning and eventual baldness (12).

The potential connection between SD and AGA has garnered increasing attention in recent years. Chronic scalp inflammation, sebum overproduction, and microbial dysbiosis associated with SD may create an unfavorable environment for hair follicle health, potentially exacerbating AGA (13). Moreover, oxidative stress and immune responses seen in SD could accelerate the follicular miniaturization process observed in AGA (14). This article aims to explore the pathophysiological links between these conditions, analyze clinical correlations, and discuss potential therapeutic strategies that could target both disorders simultaneously.

Materials and Methods

A comprehensive literature review was conducted using electronic databases such as PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The search included studies published in the last two decades, focusing on seborrheic dermatitis, androgenic alopecia, inflammation, *Malassezia*, and hair loss (15). Both experimental and clinical studies were reviewed to understand the interaction between SD and AGA. Inclusion criteria comprised peer-reviewed research articles, systematic reviews, and clinical trials that examined the pathophysiological, clinical, and therapeutic aspects of both conditions (16). Studies were analyzed for data on inflammatory markers, sebum composition, scalp microbiome changes, and treatment responses (17). Findings were synthesized to provide an in-depth discussion on the link between SD and AGA and potential treatment implications.

RESULTS

1. Pathophysiological Links:

Chronic inflammation in seborrheic dermatitis (SD) disrupts the delicate balance of the scalp's microenvironment, potentially accelerating follicular miniaturization in androgenetic alopecia (AGA). The inflammatory cascade in SD, driven by cytokine release and oxidative stress, can impair normal hair follicle function, exacerbating hair loss in genetically predisposed individuals. Pro-inflammatory mediators such as interleukin-1 (IL-1), tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), and reactive oxygen species (ROS) contribute to perifollicular inflammation, weakening the hair growth cycle and promoting premature follicular regression. Studies suggest that sustained inflammation may shorten the anagen (growth) phase while prolonging the telogen (resting) phase, leading to increased hair shedding and progressive thinning.(18,19)

2. Sebum Production:

Both AGA and SD are associated with increased sebaceous gland activity, albeit through distinct but interrelated mechanisms. In AGA, dihydrotestosterone (DHT) plays a central role in stimulating sebaceous gland hyperactivity, leading to an oily scalp environment. This excess sebum can create an optimal setting for Malassezia species overgrowth, a key factor in SD pathogenesis. The increased lipid content in sebum serves as a nutrient source for Malassezia, facilitating its proliferation and triggering an immune response that results in scalp irritation, erythema, and flaking. Additionally, lipid peroxidation of sebum components, such as squalene and free fatty acids, generates inflammatory byproducts that may further contribute to follicular damage in AGA.(20)

3. Microbial Influence:

Malassezia overgrowth in SD alters the scalp microbiome, leading to dysbiosis and an exaggerated immune response. The metabolites produced by Malassezia, particularly oleic acid and unsaturated fatty acids, can induce keratinocyte proliferation and disrupt the scalp's barrier function. This inflammatory response weakens the hair follicle's structural integrity, potentially accelerating the progression of AGA. Furthermore, Malassezia-induced inflammation has been linked to increased perifollicular fibrosis, which can limit nutrient delivery to the hair follicle, further exacerbating hair thinning. Some studies have also identified bacterial species, such as Cutibacterium acnes and Staphylococcus epidermidis, playing a role in scalp dysbiosis, potentially compounding the inflammatory burden on hair follicles.(21)

4. Clinical Correlation:

Epidemiological studies suggest a strong association between AGA and SD, with a higher prevalence of AGA

among individuals diagnosed with SD. Patients with AGA frequently report exacerbation of scalp symptoms, such as itching, redness, and scaling, when SD is present. This comorbidity underscores the possibility of a shared inflammatory pathway that exacerbates both conditions. Furthermore, the presence of SD may serve as an early indicator of scalp microenvironmental changes that predispose individuals to AGA progression. Studies indicate that patients with severe SD exhibit higher levels of scalp inflammation, which may accelerate the miniaturization of hair follicles in susceptible individuals.(22)

5. **Treatment Response:**

Given the overlapping pathophysiological mechanisms, therapeutic strategies targeting both SD and AGA often yield improved clinical outcomes. Topical antifungal agents such as ketoconazole, known for its dual anti-inflammatory and anti-androgenic properties, have shown efficacy in reducing Malassezia overgrowth while also modulating sebaceous gland activity. Corticosteroids, particularly mild-to-moderate potency formulations, help alleviate inflammation and pruritus associated with SD, indirectly benefiting hair follicle health. Additionally, systemic antiandrogens, including finasteride and dutasteride, effectively reduce DHT levels, addressing the hormonal component of AGA. Emerging therapies, such as platelet-rich plasma (PRP) and low-level laser therapy (LLLT), have demonstrated promise in mitigating inflammation and promoting follicular regeneration in patients with coexisting AGA and SD. A comprehensive treatment approach that includes anti-inflammatory, antifungal, and antiandrogenic modalities may be necessary to optimize scalp health and hair retention in affected individuals.(23)

Pathophysiological Interactions

1. **Chronic Inflammation and Oxidative Stress**: The inflammatory response in SD is characterized by the release of cytokines such as interleukin-1 (IL-1), tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), and interleukin-6 (IL-6), which contribute to a hostile scalp environment. This prolonged inflammatory state may accelerate follicular miniaturization in AGA, leading to progressive hair thinning. Additionally, oxidative stress—driven by lipid peroxidation of sebum and reactive oxygen species (ROS)—can further compromise follicular function, weakening hair shafts and shortening the anagen (growth) phase of the hair cycle.(24)
2. **Microbiome Disruption and Malassezia Overgrowth**: SD is associated with an altered scalp microbiome, particularly an overgrowth of Malassezia species. These fungi metabolize sebum lipids, releasing free fatty acids that trigger scalp irritation and inflammation. This microbial dysbiosis may further impair hair follicle health by disrupting the normal immune balance of the scalp. In AGA, studies suggest that an imbalanced microbiome may contribute to perifollicular inflammation, emphasizing the role of microbial interactions in hair loss progression.
3. **Sebaceous Gland Hyperactivity and Hormonal Influence**: Both conditions involve increased sebaceous gland activity. In AGA, dihydrotestosterone (DHT) stimulates sebaceous gland hypertrophy, leading to excessive sebum production. Similarly, in SD, excess sebum creates an environment conducive to Malassezia proliferation, which in turn exacerbates scalp inflammation. This interplay between sebaceous activity and microbial overgrowth further links SD to AGA progression, suggesting that managing sebum levels may play a crucial role in controlling both conditions.

Clinical and Therapeutic Implications

Given the shared pathophysiological mechanisms between SD and AGA, treatment strategies should aim to address both conditions holistically. Effective management may involve:

- **Anti-Inflammatory Therapies**: Topical corticosteroids, calcineurin inhibitors (such as tacrolimus and pimecrolimus), and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agents can help control SD-related inflammation and reduce its impact on hair follicles.
- **Antifungal Treatments**: Ketoconazole, a widely used antifungal agent, not only reduces Malassezia overgrowth but also exhibits mild antiandrogenic properties, making it a beneficial treatment for patients with both SD and AGA.
- **Sebum Regulation**: Retinoids and zinc pyrithione-based shampoos may help regulate sebaceous gland activity, minimizing excessive oiliness that contributes to both SD and AGA.
- **Hormonal Modulation**: In AGA, systemic antiandrogens such as finasteride and dutasteride help reduce DHT levels, indirectly mitigating sebaceous hyperactivity and inflammation.
- **Emerging Therapies**: Platelet-rich plasma (PRP) therapy and low-level laser therapy (LLLT) have demonstrated potential in reducing inflammation

and promoting follicular regeneration, offering promising avenues for combined treatment strategies.(25)

CONCLUSION

Seborrheic dermatitis (SD) and androgenetic alopecia (AGA) are interconnected dermatological conditions that share overlapping inflammatory, microbial, and sebaceous gland pathways. While AGA is primarily a genetically driven condition influenced by androgen activity, SD is largely associated with an abnormal immune response to Malassezia yeast, leading to chronic scalp inflammation. The coexistence of these conditions may create a vicious cycle where SD exacerbates AGA by promoting persistent inflammation, disrupting the scalp's microbiome, and increasing oxidative stress. Understanding these complex interactions is crucial for developing effective treatment strategies that address both conditions simultaneously.

Future Directions

Future research should focus on developing targeted therapies that address the inflammatory, microbial, and sebaceous aspects of both SD and AGA. Novel approaches, such as microbiome modulation, personalized anti-inflammatory treatments, and combination therapies integrating antiandrogenic and antifungal agents, hold potential for optimizing patient outcomes. By adopting a holistic approach to scalp health, dermatologists and researchers can improve long-term management strategies, ultimately enhancing the quality of life for individuals affected by these conditions.

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