CASE REPORT

Massive pleural effusion and marked increase of CA-125
S F Hussain, J Grayez, A Grigorian, J T Green

The tumour associated CA-125 antigen is widely used in monitoring ovarian carcinoma. In women with a massive pleural effusion and ascites, markedly increased CA-125 levels may lead to an erroneous diagnosis of ovarian cancer. Very high levels of tumour markers may be present in patients with benign pleural effusion, ascites, and chronic liver disease. Raised levels of tumour markers in serum or pleural fluid, in the absence of positive cytology, should be interpreted with caution.

CA-125 is a high molecular mass glycoprotein expressed on the cell surface of some derivatives of embryonic coelomic epithelium. The tumour associated CA-125 antigen is widely used in monitoring ovarian carcinoma. Serum CA-125 levels are increased in ovarian cancer and decrease after effective treatment. Massive pleural effusion is often malignant in nature. It had been suggested that CA-125 titres (above 1000 U/ml) could differentiate benign from often malignant in nature. It had been suggested that CA-125 decrease after effective treatment. Massive pleural effusion is associated with many benign conditions, CA-125 is of little value as a screening test for ovarian carcinoma.

DISCUSSION

Our patient had massive pleural effusion, ascites, and weight loss and was suspected to have an underlying malignancy based on high CA-125 titres. There was hesitation in offering intensive care treatment for her worsening respiratory failure. Subsequent investigations suggested cirrhosis with a negative liver screen; possibly alcohol induced cirrhosis. In a female patient, metastatic ovarian cancer may have a similar presentation and appropriate radiological and histological investigations, rather than tumour markers alone, should establish the diagnosis.

In a study of 328 patients, a CA-125 titre higher than 1000 U/ml was always due to the presence of cancer. Markedly raised serum and fluid CA-125 titres have been reported in benign conditions and represent production of the antigen in benign proliferating mesothelial cells. Increased serum CA-125 levels were detected in 52% of patients with hepatic diseases, in 100% of patients with non-gynaecological peritoneal carcinomatosis, and in 87% of patients with pleural effusion. Our patient had a combination of liver disease, ascites, and pleural effusion and this could have resulted in markedly increased CA-125 levels. Because of the high frequency of false positive results associated with many benign conditions, CA-125 is of little value as a screening test for ovarian carcinoma.

Pleural effusion with increased CA-125 levels may occur in pelvic conditions other than ovarian carcinoma. These include Meigs’ syndrome (secondary to ovarian fibroma) and pseudo-Meigs’ syndromes (secondary to other benign pelvic tumours). Removal of tumour is associated with a rapid decline in tumour markers. Increased CA-125 levels may occur with non-gynaecological malignancy such as lung cancer (69% with metastatic disease), mediastinal teratoma, and non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Tuberculosis is another cause of massive pleural effusion associated with increased levels of CA-125. Increased CA-125 levels may occur in connective tissue diseases, chronic constrictive pericarditis, and in patients on haemodialysis with pleural effusion.

Pleural effusions are found in about 6% of patients with cirrhosis; two thirds of these are right sided. A large effusion in a cirrhotic, where there is no other explanation for its accumulation, is called a hepatic hydrothorax. It appears to form because of the movement of fluid from the abdomen through right sided diaphragmatic defects. Treatment is
difficult as in many patients it is resistant to diuretics and dietary sodium restriction. Thoracocentesis usually leads to rapid reaccumulation of the effusion and a chest drain may be difficult to remove. Further options for treatment of a hepatic hydrothorax include surgical repair of the diaphragmatic defects, a transjugular intrahepatic portosystemic shunt (TIPS), or liver transplantation if indicated.

The major limitation of our case report was the absence of postmortem proof that there was no ovarian cancer. However, the presence of an underlying ovarian cancer was judged to be extremely unlikely in view of the negative ultrasound and negative computed tomography findings, negative cytology of repeated ascitic and pleural and fluid samples, and the improvement of serum CA-125 levels without any form of cancer treatment.

The recommendation that routine testing of tumour markers in pleural fluid greatly increases diagnostic effectiveness and avoids the need for invasive diagnostic tests is not supported by our case report. Increased levels of tumour markers in pleural fluid, in the absence of positive cytology, should be interpreted with caution.

Authors’ affiliations
S F Hussain, J Grayez, A Grigorian, J T Green, Llandough Hospital, Penarth, Vale of Glamorgan, UK

Correspondence to: Dr Syed Fayyaz Hussain, Section of Pulmonary Medicine, Aga Khan University Hospital, Stadium Road, PO Box 3500, Karachi 74800, Pakistan; sfh_pulmonary@yahoo.co.uk; fhussain@akunet.org

Submitted 9 July 2003
Accepted 19 August 2003

REFERENCES
Massive pleural effusion and marked increase of CA-125

S F Hussain, J Grayez, A Grigorian and J T Green

Postgrad Med J 2004 80: 300-301
doi: 10.1136/pgmj.2003.012377

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://pmj.bmj.com/content/80/943/300

These include:

References
This article cites 9 articles, 2 of which you can access for free at:
http://pmj.bmj.com/content/80/943/300#BIBL

Email alerting service
Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

Topic Collections
Articles on similar topics can be found in the following collections

- Screening (oncology) (91)
- Gynecological cancer (6)
- Liver disease (76)

Notes

To request permissions go to:
http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/