

Dermatologic considerations in ultraorthodox Jews: An illustrative case series



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INTRODUCTION

The estimated worldwide census of Jews showed that 39% lived in the United States in 2013. Sixty-two percent of orthodox Jews are strictly observant ultraorthodox (Haredi) Jews.¹ Ultraorthodox Jews marry younger and have twice as many children than other adults of the Jewish faith.² Observance of ultraorthodox Judaism includes a variety of observances some of which are listed in Table I.³⁻⁸ The following patient case series addresses some of the rare dermatologic manifestations of Ashkenazi ultraorthodox Jewish observance throughout the life cycle. Ashkenazi Jews are those who are of Eastern European descent.

CASE SERIES

Case 1

A full-term male infant born to a 19-year-old ultraorthodox primigravida had ritual circumcision on day 8 of life, including “metzizah b’peh,” a rare practice of orally drawing blood from the wound. On day 14, lesions developed in the groin, spreading to the distal feet and ankles, which did not respond to topical anti-infectives (Fig 1). On day 25, referral to dermatology resulted in admission for presumptive neonatal herpes, confirmed by direct fluorescence antigen testing positive for herpes simplex virus 1 (HSV-1). The child responded well to 21 days of intravenous acyclovir.

Case 2

A 7-year-old ultraorthodox Jewish boy had truncal flares of atopic dermatitis. The child responded well

Abbreviation used:

HSV-1: herpes simplex virus 1

to triamcinolone ointment 0.1% and had a reduction in truncal flaring with a change from wool to cotton tiztis/t.

Case 3

A 10-year-old ultraorthodox man presented with asymmetry of his sideburns (payos/t) as part of his alopecia areata (Fig 2).

Case 4

An 18-year-old ultraorthodox man presented with intractable head and neck dermatitis that had failed to respond to topical therapies (Fig 3). Complete remission was noted with dupilumab therapy after 1 year, except for a solitary square plaque on the forehead. Phylactery (tefillin) allergic contact dermatitis was then confirmed by patch testing demonstrating 1+ fragrance mix and 2+ potassium dichromate reactions.

Case 5

A 46 year-old ultraorthodox woman presented with a 1.5-cm² area of scarring alopecia in the frontal scalp, corresponding to the hair clip on her wig (sheitel) (Fig 4). The patient responded well to a wig attached to a cotton headband, without clips.

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Table I. Orthodox observance by sex and age group

Male			
Practice	Age/Timing	Hebrew terminology	Associated dermatologic issues
Circumcision	Day 8 of life*	Bris/t (bris/t milah)	Surgical complications Transmission of HSV-1 ^{2,4}
Haircut	Age 3	Upshirin	None reported [†]
Long sideburns	Age 3 and over	Payos/t Ultraorthodox Jews may never cut the payot	None reported
Fringed garment	Age 3 and over	Tzitzis/t (tallis/t katan) (may be wool)	Wool can cause itching in some individuals
Skullcap	Age 3 and over	Kippah/yarmulka	Attached metal pin fasteners have been reported to cause pseudo-alopecia areata ⁶
Coming of age	Age 13	Bar mitzvah [‡]	Normative and associated with self-image development ⁸
Phylacteries	Age 13 and over	Tefillin	Contact dermatitis ⁹ Associated with lower cardiac mortality ¹⁰
Prayer shawl	Age 13 for Sephardic Jews At the time of marriage for most Ashkenazi Jews	Tallis/tallit	None reported
Beard	Adulthood	No razor usage on the face. Beard is optional, but common in Jews who do not shave with a razor	Electric shavers can be associated with nickel and fragrance allergy, as well as irritation and tinea, but none of these have been reported specifically in Orthodox Jews ¹¹⁻¹⁴
Female			
Practice	Age/Timing	Hebrew terminology	Associated dermatologic issues
Naming	The first week of life in synagogue		None reported
Coming of age	Age 12	Bas/t mitzvah [‡]	Normative and associated with self-image development ⁸
Hair coverage	After marriage	Tiechel (scarf) Sheitel (wig)	Hair loss from clips

HSV-1, Herpes simplex virus 1.

*May be deferred for health reasons.

[†]None reported: PubMed search for term "upshirin," no results were found; PubMed search for payos/t yielded an author by that name, but no discussion of the hair; PubMed search was negative for traditional tallis/tallit usage.

[‡]Taking on full adult observances of the unmarried.

DISCUSSION

Case 1 was previously reported by the New York State Department of Health in a series of 11 cases of HSV-1 infections from ritual circumcision (November 2000-December 2011). Ten of the children were hospitalized, and 2 died. The dermatologist seeing neonates and infants should have a high level of suspicion. At this time, polymerase chain reaction testing for HSV-1 would be the recommended test for rapid confirmation as it is significantly more rapid and sensitive than viral culture. The relative risk of neonatal HSV infection is 3.4 times in the setting of metzizah b'peh.⁹ Specialized counseling documents and advisories have been developed and are accessible online.¹⁰

Men are commanded in the Hebrew Bible to wear the tzitzis/t, a tunic-like garment that goes over the head, is worn over the chest, and has specially knotted fringes on all 4 corners. Some ultraorthodox men wear it against the body, and others wear it over a shirt or undershirt. The practitioner should be aware that the garments are usually wool and can cause flare eczema when worn against the body.¹¹

The practitioner should also be aware that alopecia areata can present as foreshortening of the payos/t in an ultraorthodox Jewish man. The lopsided appearance may be a source of shame or stigma in a community of ultraorthodox Jews.

Pseudo alopecia areata has been described from metal clips attached to skullcaps, but the location in



Fig 1. Case 1: groin area appearance of erythematous papules and vesicles.



Fig 3. A 2-cm² area of thin erythematous plaque on the forehead-hairline border at the site of placement of phylacteries in case 4.



Fig 2. Foreshortened posterior growth of part of the sideburn in case 3.



Fig 4. Anterior hairline demonstrating scarring alopecia at the site of wig hair clip in case 5.

that condition is over the crown.¹² Traction alopecia from hair clips on wigs is a concern for ultraorthodox women who maintain hair under their wigs. To reduce traction, the patient can use a soft cotton band to hold the wig in place.

Tefillin (phylacteries) are small, tanned leather boxes containing parchments inscribed with religious texts. It is a positive commandment for men to wear them.¹³ Tefillin consist of a portion for

the head, affixed with a leather strap, and an arm portion, affixed with a leather strap that is wound around the forearm, hand, and fingers. Tefillin or phylactery allergic contact dermatitis caused by potassium dichromate allergy has been described in orthodox Jewish men.¹⁴ In case 4, phylactery allergy became obvious after 12 months of dupilumab therapy. Dupilumab therapy has been described elsewhere as a potential therapy for allergic contact dermatitis and can be considered in refractory Tefillin dermatitis.¹⁵

Ultraorthodox Jews are a religious minority subset, within the religious minority of Judaism. Sensitivity to and awareness of ultraorthodox Jewish patients' religious practices are needed to properly approach this population. Avoidance of negative judgment or culturally insensitive interventions is necessary to appropriately address cultural dermatoses.

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