A mnemonic to assist patients with topical steroid application

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CLINICAL CHALLENGE

Patients are often prescribed multiple topical corticosteroids (TCs) simultaneously with instructions on how and where to apply them. Despite provider instructions, "the one that starts with a T" is often the response that is given when asked what medication they are using. These prescriptions often look similar and have nondescriptive names that might confuse patients and lead to incorrect anatomical site applications.[1] These errors can lead to delays or failures in healing, as well as cutaneous side effects such as skin atrophy. An easy way to associate anatomic site to TC name might be beneficial for patients who are otherwise unfamiliar with these medications.

SOLUTION

We have developed an alliterative mnemonic that simplifies a patient's understanding of where to apply commonly used TCs, as they only have to remember the first letter: hydrocortisone — head and hairy areas (face, underarms, groin), desonide — dome and dirty areas (face, underarms, groin), triamcinolone — trunk or torso, betamethasone — body, and clobetasol — core (body). Comparing efficacy, we instructed 10 adult patients where to apply these 5 medications using standard verbal instructions and 10 patients using the verbal mnemonic (total, n = 20). When patients were quizzed 10 minutes after instruction, retention rate was higher with the mnemonic than standard instruction (92% vs 66% medication sites correct on a brief survey; Table I). Use of this mnemonic in our clinic helps patients remember which topical steroids to use where.

Table I. Comparison between standard instruction and TC mnemonic

Patient instructions (randomization into 1 group below)
Standard instruction: Patients were given the names of 5 TCs as well as anatomical locations in which to apply. (Example: Apply betamethasone to arms, legs, and body.)
Mnemonic: Patients were given the full mnemonic, which included TC names (with emphasis on the first letter of the TC) and anatomic locations in which to apply.
Postinstruction survey
1. Which 2 of these steroids would be good to use on thinner skin (such as the face, underarms, and/or groin)?
2. Which 3 of these steroids would be good to use on the thicker skin (such as arms, legs, trunk/torso)?

Recruitment was from patients in a clinical dermatology setting and respondents were randomly selected into instruction groups. Both groups completed a postinstruction survey. For the survey, patients could select from a provided list of TC names: clobetasol, triamcinolone, betamethasone, desonide, hydrocortisone. Values were the percentage of correct responses (out of 5) per patient.

TC, Topical corticosteroid.

REFERENCE

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