Subungual Melanoma Often Presents Without Any Visible Pigmentation

NEW YORK — Subungual melanomas are often difficult to diagnose and thus present in an advanced clinical stage with poor prognosis, Dr. Richard Scorer said at the Fourth International Melanoma Congress. A review of the Sydney Melanoma Unit’s experience between 1991 and 2004 showed that 124 patients presented with subungual melanoma (64 men and 60 women). The median patient age was 59 years, and the most common site was the great toe (24%). Most melanomas were locally advanced, with median Breslow thickness of 3.2 mm. Sentinel lymph node biopsy was positive in 24% (7 of 29 patients).

Follow-up data were available for 9 of 11 patients with early melanoma. American Joint Committee on Cancer disease stage at diagnosis, which was known in 121 patients, was the most important survival factor. Eleven patients (9%) were stage 0 (melanoma in situ), 16 (13%) were stage I, 50 (40%) were stage II, 39 (31%) were stage III, and 5 (4%) were stage IV.

The most common presentation in this group of patients was a pigmented subungual lesion or a raised or polypoid nodule, but “in more than one-third of patients (39%), there was no visible pigmentation in the affected area,” said Dr. Scorer of the University of Sydney.

Biopsies can be challenging to pathologists, in part because the features of melanoma in situ and the radial growth phase of melanoma are subtle. The most common early sign is longitudinal melanonychia. Particular red flags in these pigmented bands are increasing width, irregular width, and irregular spacing under dermoscopy, as well as extensions onto the proximal lateral nail fold (Hutchinson’s sign). Subungual melanoma is important in the differential diagnosis, he said.

Unlike other melanomas, subungual melanoma is not associated with exposure to UV light, given that the nail plate is a UV barrier. Thus, incidence is similar among different ethnic backgrounds and skin tones. However, because melanomas in general are rare in people with darker skin, this group of subungual melanomas is much greater proportion of melanomas among such persons, Dr. Scorer noted.

—John R. Bell

Classic Histology Measures Useful in Melanoma Exam of Black Patients

BALTIMORE — Several classic parameters of melanoma histology are associated with survival and thus have a role in evaluating black patients, according to a presenter at the annual meeting of the American Society for Dermatopathology.

The incidence of melanoma in blacks is approximately 20 times lower than in whites, presumably because of the protective effects of the metal content, said Dr. Doru T. Alexandrescu of the melanoma center at the Washington (D.C.) Hospital Center and his colleagues.

When blacks do present with melanoma, they are more likely to have stage III or IV disease, thicker primaries, and a poor prognosis. Histologic parameters of melanoma have not previously been described in black patients, the investigators noted.

For this study, the researchers analyzed the biopsy specimens of all black patients with malignant melanoma, of which 34 were evaluable histologically. The average patient age was 62 years.

—Kerri Wachter