Perspective

iMedPub Journals
www.imedpub.com

Journal of Rare Disorders: Diagnosis & Therapy
ISSN 2380-7245

2023
Vol.9 No.4:125

Pantothenate Kinase-Associated Neurodegeneration: The Dystonia with Eyes Disorder

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Received date: July 21, 2023, Manuscript No. IPRDDT-23-17885; **Editor assigned date:** July 24, 2023, PreQC No. IPRDDT-23-17885 (PQ); **Reviewed date:** August 07, 2023, QC No. IPRDDT-23-17885; **Revised date:** August 14, 2023, Manuscript No. IPRDDT-23-17885 (R); **Published date:** August 21, 2023, DOI: 10.36648/2380-7245.9.4.125

Citation: Mart L (2023) Pantothenate Kinase-Associated Neurodegeneration: The Dystonia with Eyes Disorder. J Rare Disord Diagn Ther Vol.9 No. 4:125.

Description

Pantothenate Kinase-Associated Neurodegeneration (PKAN) is a rare and devastating neurodegenerative disorder that falls under the umbrella of diseases known as Neurodegeneration with Brain Iron Accumulation (NBIA). PKAN is particularly distinctive due to its characteristic features, which include dystonia and a peculiar eye movement abnormality colloquially referred to as the "Eye of the Tiger" sign on brain imaging. This article delves into the intricacies of PKAN, exploring its clinical presentation, underlying genetic causes, pathophysiology, and current management approaches. PKAN primarily affects children and adolescents, typically becoming symptomatic during the first decade of life. The disorder's hallmark features include dystonia, a movement disorder characterized by sustained muscle contractions that result in twisting and repetitive movements, and the aforementioned "Eye of the Tiger" sign, which can be observed on brain MRI scans. Dystonia is the most prominent symptom in PKAN and often the initial sign of the disorder. It can manifest as generalized dystonia, where the entire body is affected, or focal dystonia, which predominantly affects a specific body part. Generalized dystonia can cause severe motor impairment, leading to difficulty in walking, speaking, and performing daily tasks. This progressive and disabling movement disorder significantly impacts the quality of life of affected individuals. This peculiar radiological finding, observed on T2-weighted MRI scans of the brain, is characterized by a central region of hyperintensity (bright signal) within the globus pallidus, surrounded by a rim of hypointensity. This sign is not pathognomonic of PKAN but is highly suggestive of the disease. It is caused by iron accumulation in the globus pallidus, a brain structure involved in motor control.

The Role of Pantothenate Kinase

Beyond dystonia and the "Eye of the Tiger" sign, individuals with PKAN may develop a range of neurological symptoms. These can include dysarthria, and cognitive impairment. In advanced stages, patients may experience rigidity and bradykinesia, which are characteristic features of Parkinsonism. PKAN is primarily an autosomal recessive disorder, meaning that two copies of the defective gene are required for the disease to manifest. The underlying genetic defect in PKAN involves mutations in the PANK2 gene, which encodes pantothenate kinase 2, an enzyme crucial for the synthesis of coenzyme A. CoA is essential for various metabolic pathways, including the synthesis of fatty acids and the tricarboxylic acid cycle. Pantothenate kinase 2 converts pantothenate into 4-phosphopantothenate, a critical step in CoA biosynthesis. Mutations in the PANK2 gene lead to impaired enzyme function, resulting in CoA deficiency. The exact mechanism by which CoA deficiency leads to the neurodegenerative changes seen in PKAN is still a subject of ongoing research. However, it is thought that disrupted CoA metabolism may impair mitochondrial function, leading to oxidative stress, energy depletion, and iron accumulation in the brain, all of which contribute to neurodegeneration. One of the most striking features of PKAN is the excessive accumulation of iron in specific brain regions, particularly the globus pallidus. This iron buildup is believed to play a central role in the pathogenesis of the disease. While the precise mechanisms linking iron accumulation to neurodegeneration are not fully understood, several hypotheses have excess iron can catalyze the production of Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS), leading to oxidative stress and damage to neurons. This oxidative damage may contribute to the degeneration of brain tissue in PKAN.

Current Management Approaches

Mitochondria are crucial for cellular energy production, and their dysfunction can lead to energy depletion and cell death. Disrupted Iron Homeostasis: Mutations in PANK2 may disrupt iron homeostasis in the brain, leading to abnormal iron deposition. Iron is tightly regulated in the brain, and dysregulation can have detrimental effects on neuronal function and viability. Iron accumulation can trigger neuroinflammatory responses, further exacerbating neuronal damage. Inflammation in the brain can lead to the release of pro-inflammatory cytokines and the activation of microglia, which are immune cells in the central nervous system. Managing PKAN is challenging due to its rarity and complex pathophysiology. Treatment options aim to alleviate symptoms and improve the quality of life for affected individuals but do not offer a cure. Some of the current management medications such as muscle relaxants and botulinum toxin injections can help manage dystonia and spasticity. Physical and occupational therapy may

also be beneficial in maintaining mobility and function. In severe cases of dystonia that do not respond to medication, DBS may be considered. DBS involves implanting electrodes in specific brain regions and is used to modulate abnormal neuronal activity. As the disease progresses, individuals with PKAN may require various forms of supportive care, including assistive devices for mobility, speech therapy, and counseling to address emotional and psychological challenges. Ongoing research is focused on developing disease-modifying treatments for PKAN. Some approaches being explored include iron chelation therapy to reduce brain iron levels and gene therapy to restore PANK2 function. Despite the challenges, there is hope on the horizon for PKAN. Advances in our understanding of the disease's genetic and biochemical underpinnings, along with ongoing research efforts, hold the promise of more effective treatments and, ultimately, a cure for this devastating disorder. Additionally, increased awareness and collaboration among researchers, clinicians, and patient advocacy groups are essential for improving the lives of individuals and families affected by PKAN. Through continued research and support, we aim to unravel the mysteries of this rare disorder and develop innovative therapies to alleviate the suffering of those living with PKAN.