

Answer

Primary Splenic High-Grade Lymphoma

P rimary splenic lymphoma is rare, representing less than 2% of all lymphomas.¹ However, B-cell lymphomas are seen with increasing frequency in patients with chronic hepatitis C. This patient was known to have a splenic mass that was being followed up with serial CT scans because the working diagnosis at the time was a hepatoma metastatic to the spleen. Recently, the mass increased in size and the patient underwent a splenectomy. The patient also had a corresponding rise in his α -fetoprotein level. After the splenectomy, the α -fetoprotein level decreased significantly. However, it did not return to the normal range.

Several epidemiologic studies suggest that hepatitis C virus may be involved in the pathogenesis of B-cell lymphomas.² These may range from low-grade to high-grade non-Hodgkin's lymphomas. This patient had a known mass in his spleen that suddenly increased in size. Therefore, it is possible that he had a low-grade, marginal-zone lymphoma that became transformed by the hepatitis C into a high-grade lymphoma.

α -Fetoprotein is a tumor marker that is used to evaluate patients for hepatocellular carcinoma. Also, elevated α -fetoprotein levels are frequently seen with certain germ cell tumors. However, to our knowledge, there is only 1 case report in the literature that reports a correlation between an elevated α -fetoprotein level and a lymphoma.³ Therefore, it is of uncertain significance that the α -fetoprotein level rose in conjunction with an increase in size of the lymphoma and then decreased once the lymphoma was removed. It is conceivable that the rise in the α -fetoprotein level is related to the hepatitis C virus inflammatory response. However, we would not have expected it to decrease after the splenectomy.

Further studies and a better understanding of hepatitis C viral infection will help us explain the association between B-cell lymphomas and hepatitis C. However, any patient who has hepatitis C should undergo close surveillance for both hepatomas and lymphomas.

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