



PIC QUESTION OF THE WEEK: 12/05/05

Q: How significant is the alteration of taste attributed to terbinafine?

A: Can you imagine spooning turkey and stuffing into your mouth and not being able to taste the richness of the meal or, even worse, experience a strange metallic taste? Post-marketing surveillance has identified taste disturbances as a rather common adverse effect of therapy with terbinafine. This agent is a synthetic anti-fungal labeled for the treatment of onychomycosis (fungal infection of toenails or fingernails). A number of terms have been used to define disorders of taste. These include dysgeusia (impairment of or distorted taste), ageusia (loss of taste), and hypogeusia (blunting of taste). Taste disturbances associated with terbinafine have ranged from mild dysgeusia to ageusia. A study published several years ago identified 87 cases of probable terbinafine-induced taste loss compared to 362 users of the drug who did not have taste disorders. The onset of taste-related problems was approximately 35 days while recovery generally was reported within 4 months. Risk factors identified in this case series included a low BMI, history of taste loss, and ageing. A more recent case report describes a 41-year-old male who described loss of appetite and severe dysgeusia approximately 4 weeks after initiating treatment with terbinafine. The patient developed extreme weight loss and required subsequent hospitalization for rehydration and further medical care. The disturbance persisted, but slowly resolved over 6 months. Another patient is described in the literature whose alteration in taste extended for almost 3 years. Terbinafine's elimination half-life is 22-26 hours; however, because of wide tissue distribution, its terminal half-life ranges from 200-400 hours. Thus, it would not be surprising that recovery of taste requires a lengthy period of time. The mechanism by which terbinafine produces taste disturbances is unknown. Although zinc supplementation has been used for taste disorders for a number of years, there is little evidence it would provide benefit for terbinafine-induced taste disturbances. Alteration of taste is an often underestimated complication of terbinafine therapy and must be considered whenever the drug is prescribed.

References:

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- Stricker B, Van Riemsdijk M, Sturkenboom M, et al. Taste loss to terbinafine: a case-control study of potential risk factors. *Br J Clin Pharmacol* 1996;42:313-8.

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