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Jessica R. Valente, Emory University
Mayor D. Mody, Emory University
Richard Ramonell, Emory University
Michael Yin, Emory University
Robert McClung, Emory University
Jean Wheeler, Emory University
Srijita Mukherjee, Emory University
John Doran, Emory University
Michael Connor, Emory University

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Severe Acute Hyponatremia as an Initial Presentation of Acute Intermittent Porphyria Triggered by a Subdermal Etonogestrel Implant

Jessica R Valente1, Mayur D Mody1, Richard P Ramonell1, Michael Yin1, R Paul McClung1, Jean Wheeler2*, Srijita Mukherjee2, John J Doran1 and Michael J Connor4

1Department of Medicine, Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, Georgia, USA
2Department of Anesthesia, Critical Care & Emergency Medicine, Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, Georgia, USA
3Department of Medicine, Division of Renal Medicine, Atlanta, Georgia, USA
4Department of Medicine, Divisions of Pulmonary, Allergy, Critical Care, Renal Medicine & Sleep Medicine, Atlanta, Georgia, USA

Abstract

Objective
We present a case of acute intermittent porphyria with accompanying euvolemic hyponatremia from elevated ADH triggered by an implanted hormonal contraceptive device.

Case description
A 19-year-old African-American female with history of childbirth two months prior presented to the emergency department of Grady Memorial Hospital with vague but severe back pain and found with marked hyponatremia of 125mEq/L. Serum sodium level decreased to 113mEq/L after volume resuscitation with 0.9% sodium chloride. The patient experienced progressive decline in mental status and a single generalized tonic clonic seizure. Patient was admitted to intensive care unit and improved with administration of 3% sodium chloride. Extensive evaluation for etiology of euvolemic hyponatremia from elevated ADH revealed normal water restriction, hypertonic sodium chloride, vasopressin receptor antagonists, and antihypertensive medications. Empiric removal of a recently inserted etonogestrel implant was performed with resolution of patient’s symptoms. Approximately 2 weeks following hospital discharge, the send-out lab for urine porphobilinogen was found to be notably elevated.

Introduction
Acute Intermittent Porphyria (AIP) is one of several disorders that arise from enzymatic derangements in the biosynthetic pathway of the heme molecule. AIP is the most common of the acute porphyrias worldwide, with an estimated prevalence of approximately 5 per 100,000 people [1]. Specifically, AIP results from a defective copy in one of the two genes for Porphobilinogen (PBG) deaminase, leading to the inadequate synthesis of the normal enzyme. Typically, patients will be symptom-free until a precipitating factor causes increased transit through the porphyrin metabolic pathway, resulting in accumulation in Aminolevulinic Acid (ALA) and Porphobilinogen (PBG) (Figure 1) [2-4]. AIP is the second most common porphyria but can have variable expression making diagnosis difficult [5]. We describe a case of acute intermittent porphyria that presented with non-specific lower back pain and progressive acute hyponatremia complicated by seizure, acute encephalopathy, tachycardia, and hypertension.

Case Description
A 19 year old African-American recently post-partum female with no known past medical history presented to the emergency department of Grady Memorial Hospital for a 3 day history of worsening mid-back pain and fatigue. Two months prior to admission, the primigravida delivered a pre-term infant at 27 weeks gestational age following spontaneous rupture of membranes. At admission, the primigravida delivered a pre-term infant at 27 weeks gestational age following spontaneous rupture of membranes. At that time, she received antenatal steroids, tocolysis, empiric group B Streptococcus prophylaxis, and had an uneventful vaginal delivery. She was discharged two days after delivery. There is no mention of eclampsia or preeclampsia during review of outside records.

She recovered well and elected to have an etonogestrel 68 mg implant (Implanon®, Merck & Co., Inc., Whitehouse Station, NJ, USA) placed in her left arm for contraception, which was performed two weeks prior to this presentation. The patient continued to produce and pump breast milk throughout this time. Two weeks prior to this presentation, the patient continued to produce and pump breast milk throughout this time. She presented to an Emergency Department (ED) at another hospital for mid-back pain and fatigue, was diagnosed with a viral syndrome, and life-threatening consequences.

Keywords: Acute intermittent porphyria; Etonogestrel implant; Hyponatremia; Postpartum; Seizure; SIADH
and discharged home. Notable laboratory studies from that visit revealed sodium of 131mEq/L and creatinine of 1.26mg/dL (baseline 0.7-0.8). The following morning the patient continued to experience severe back pain. The patient's parents noticed worsened fatigue, prompting presentation to our ED for further evaluation. On the day of admission, the patient also described three days of decreased appetite and nausea.

Initial physical examination was unremarkable; the patient's back was not tender to palpation, nor could pain be elicited by musculoskeletal or costovertebral angle maneuvers. Laboratory evaluation revealed a sodium level of 125mEq/L and a creatinine of 1.1mg/dL. Initial imaging, including CT renal stone protocol and CT Head without contrast, was unrevealing. The ED physicians assessed the patient as having hypovolemic hyponatremia, and administered a two liter bolus of 0.9% sodium chloride (NaCl). Following this, the patient's mental status deteriorated and repeats sodium was decreased to 116mEq/L, prompting consultation to the Medical Intensive Care Unit (MICU) service for progressively symptomatic and worsening acute hyponatremia. On MICU evaluation, repeat physical examination suggested patient was currently at or near euvoeulia. On neurological exam, she was now obtunded and unresponsive to verbal or painful stimuli with a disconjugate gaze and absent patellar reflexes. Sinus tachycardia to 120s and marked hypertension with systolic blood pressures in the 200s were noted. She was admitted to the MICU for intensive monitoring of sodium and acute treatment of hyponatremia and hypertension. While en route to ICU, she suffered a witnessed general tonic clonic seizure of two minutes duration prompting emergent intubation for airway protection.

Immediate laboratory data post-seizure revealed sodium level of 113mEq/L. Urine sodium of 174mEq/L, urine osmolality of 473mOsm/kg, and serum osmolality of 245mOsm/kg again suggesting euvoeulic hyponatremia and consistent with elevated ADH state. Fluid restriction and infusion of 3% NaCl at 30mL/hr were started. As malignant hypertension (possibly from post-partum eclampsia) leading to hypertensive encephalopathy and seizure could not be immediately excluded, a nicardipine infusion was initiated for acute blood pressure control. Over the next 24 hours, sodium level increased to 124mEq/L, and infusion of 3% hypertonic saline was decreased to 15mL/hr. No further seizure activity occurred and acute encephalopathy and focal neurologic symptoms improved steadily, facilitating liberation from mechanical ventilation within 24 hours. Table 1 demonstrates further diagnostic evaluation undertaken to determine etiology of apparent SIADH state on admission [6,7]. While the underlying etiology of patient's elevated ADH state was unknown initially, it is important to note that several of patient's symptoms, including pain and nausea, are likely to have contributed to her elevated ADH state.

Table 1: Relevant differential diagnosis of SIADH and corresponding diagnostic work-up for our patient’s presentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Etiologies of SIADH</th>
<th>Patient findings/results</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other causes of excessive ADH</td>
<td>Normal TSH and cosyntropin stimulation test</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hypothyroidism</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Adrenal insufficiency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malignancy</td>
<td>Negative chest, abdomen, and pelvis CT scans, negative transvaginal ultrasound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lung</td>
<td>Negative chest CT, absence of clinical symptoms consistent with infection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gastrointestinal lymphoma</td>
<td>Negative HIV testing during pregnancy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Genitourinary</td>
<td>Normal hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Infection</td>
<td>Labs, current lactation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tuberculosis</td>
<td>Psychiatric consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pneumonia</td>
<td>Drug/volatile screen negative, with exception of raised acetone level from starvation ketosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HIV</td>
<td>Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intracranial processes</td>
<td>Was not on any of these medications at presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain tumors</td>
<td>Elevated urine porphobilinogen - result available after hospital discharge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traumatic brain injury</td>
<td>Psychiatric consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encephalitis</td>
<td>Postpartum psychosis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple sclerosis</td>
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<td>Sheehan’s syndrome</td>
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<td>Medications/Ingestions</td>
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<td>SSRIs</td>
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<td>Narcotics</td>
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<td>Antipsychotics</td>
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<td>NSAIDs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecstasy</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Others</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acute Intermittent Porphyria (AIP)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acute psychosis</td>
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<tr>
<td>Table 1: Relevant differential diagnosis of SIADH and corresponding diagnostic work-up for our patient’s presentation.</td>
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</table>
appropriate ADH release from volume depletion from inappropri-
ate ADH release (SIADH) in these cases as many patients have acute
volume depletion at presentation, and it is known that patients with 
porphyria have a lower blood volume at baseline [12]. On the basis 
of the MICU team physical exam suggesting euvoletic state and 
2L fluid bolus with 0.9% NaCl by the ED, our team interpreted the 
urinary studies to be consistent with an SIADH state while admitting 
that this may not be entirely the case. In addition to encephalopathy,
other important diagnostic clues for AIP include dark reddish-brown 
urine on phenylalanine and elevated spot urinary porphobilinogen,
usually indicative of an acute symptomatic attack. Low 
porphobilinogen deaminase activity can be detected during times of 
disease remission [13]. The mainstay of AIP management involves 
the avoidance of suspected precipitants [14]. Well-known precipitants 
include sulfonamide antibiotics, anti-epileptics, Oral Contraceptive 
Pills (OCPs), alcohol, decreased caloric intake, stress, and smoking [15]. In addition to symptomatic management, glucose or intravenous heme (heme arginate in Europe or panhematin in the USA) can be 
administered to reduce starvation ketosis and ALA synthesis,
respectively, in those patients with known or highly suspected cases of AIP [8,9,14].

Six weeks after a recent childbirth, our patient elected to have an 
etonogestrel implant inserted into her arm as a contraceptive method.
Two weeks later, the patient experienced symptoms and laboratory 
findings consistent with AIP. In review of porphyrinogenic medications 
listed on the Porphyrina Foundation’s drug database, progestins are listed as unsafe due to their ability to induce 
accumulation of porphyrins [16]. We believe that the progestin-only 
contraception, in addition to her recent decreased caloric intake,
triggered this AIP crisis and, ultimately, established the patient as 
suffering from porphyria. Following removal of etonogestrel implant 
and discontinuation of other porphyrinogenic medications (such 
as nicardipine), the patient’s clinical status, including symptomatic 
hyponatremia, dramatically improved. Despite studies demonstrating 
the association of AIP attacks with oral contraception [17,18],
importantly and to our knowledge, none have reported the role of 
an implanted contraceptive in precipitating overt AIP. Adding to the 
unusual nature of our patient’s case is the rarity of AIP among African 
and African American populations. A review published in 2000 noted that 
only 38 patients have been reported with AIP and African ancestory, and this is thought to be due to a different spectrum of 
mutations in the Porphobilinogen Deaminase gene (PBGD) in the 
African population compared to the Caucasian population [19,20].

Sex hormones such as estrogen and progesterone have been 
previously implicated in the precipitation of acute AIP crises [15,21-23]. Approximately 10-30% of women with porphyria experience cyclical AIP attacks, an association thought to be 
secondary to progesterone’s induction of ALA synthase, one of the 
major rate-limiting steps in heme synthesis [18]. This relationship of 
AIP with progesterone is further established by improved clinical 
symptoms with the use of Gonadotropin-Releasing Hormone (GnRH) 
agonists in patients with recurrent cyclical AIP attacks [21]. GnRH 
agonists decrease the number of pituitary GnRH receptors, leading to 
suppressed hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis and decreased 
progesterone release [18]. Furthermore, in a Swedish population-
based study, questionnaires administered to 166 women with 
clinical or latent AIP demonstrated that 24% of participants 
experienced an AIP attack with concurrent OCP use, and 18% of 
respondents stated that OCPs actually precipitated their first AIP
attack [17]. AIP attacks can also occur during pregnancy but first 
presentations of AIP are rare during this time. A single case series, 
by Keung et al., described women with latent or undiagnosed AIP 
presenting with overt clinical symptoms during pregnancy or 
postpartum period. However, it is unclear whether the hormonal 
changes occurring during pregnancy alone are sufficient to exacerbate AIP, as most women described in this case series also experienced the use of a potential aggravating medication, comorbid infections, or 
decreased caloric intake [24].

Once the precipitating medications were removed, our patient 
required symptomatic treatment alone without the use of heme.
Interestingly, our patient’s family did note an uncharacteristic 
high-carbohydrate diet. These cravings could illustrate the role of 
carbohydrate loading in the suppression of ALA synthase and 
subsequent decreased production of intermediate porphyrins. 
Although high carbohydrate diets have previously been advocated as 
integral to preventing future AIP attacks, and were commonly used 
in the treatment of AIP prior to heme availability, the benefit of high 
carbohydrate diets has not been scientifically proven [25].

Once the diagnosis of AIP is suspected and/or confirmed in a 
patient, it is advisable to refer the patient to one of the participating 
clinical centers in the Porphyrina Consortium of the Rare Disease 
Clinical Research Network. There are nine such clinical centers 
located in the USA. In addition, patients should be informed of the 
availability of genetic testing through the Department of Genetics & 
Genomic Sciences at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in 
New York, New York [26].

Conclusion

Acute intermittent porphyria requires high clinical suspicion, 
especially in young females with abdominal pain out of proportion 
to physical exam, SIADH, and new-onset hypertension. Because of
the low prevalence of this disease in the United States, AIP was,
admittedly, not high on our initial differential diagnosis for our 
patient’s presenting signs and symptoms. However, a negative history and 
laboratory work-up for eclampsia, Sheehan's syndrome, 
intoxication, and adrenal insufficiency prompted reconsideration of 
more rare diagnoses. An elevated spot urine porphobilinogen,
review of the patient’s recent medications, and the collection of clinical 
symptoms in a relatively healthy 19 year old female suggested an 
acute exacerbation of undiagnosed latent AIP. Our particular case 
demonstrated newly diagnosed AIP with acute attack likely prompted by recent etonogestrel implant insertion and complicated by decreased 
nutritional intake. The importance of recognition and diagnosis is
paramount to preventing morbidity and life-threatening consequenc-
es of AIP, and AIP should be considered as a rare cause of euvoletic 
hyponatremia in critically ill patients.

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