

Atrophic pancreas following immunotherapy

IMAGES IN MEDICINE

IDA FRIVOLD GLAD

ida.frivold@gmail.com

Department of Gastroenterology

Oslo University Hospital, Ullevål

and

Unger-Vetlesen Institute

Lovisenberg Diaconal Hospital

and

University of Oslo

Ida Frivold Glad, specialty registrar in gastroenterology and a PhD research fellow

The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

KATINKA NORA ROLSTAD ARNLJOT

Department of Radiology

Lovisenberg Diaconal Hospital

Katinka Nora Rolstad Arnljot, specialist in radiology and senior consultant

The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

JAN ØYVIND KVALØY

Lovisenberg Palliative Care Unit

Lovisenberg Diaconal Hospital

Jan Øyvind Kvaløy, specialist in oncology and senior consultant

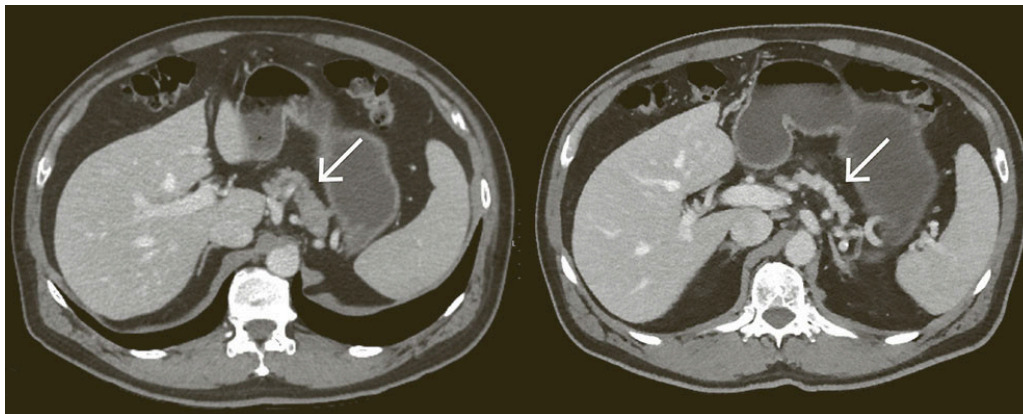
The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

JØRGEN VALEUR

Unger-Vetlesen Institute
Lovisenberg Diaconal Hospital
and
University of Oslo

Jørgen Valeur, specialist in internal medicine and gastroenterology,
senior consultant and professor

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The CT image on the left shows an axial cross-sectional image of the abdomen with a normal-appearing pancreas (arrow) in a man in his fifties with malignant melanoma, taken three weeks before initiation of immunotherapy with nivolumab, a monoclonal antibody that blocks the PD-1 receptor. Due to new-onset steatorrhea and a 10 kg weight loss, a repeat CT examination was performed seven months after completion of treatment (image on the right), which demonstrated new-onset atrophy of the pancreas (arrow). Further investigations showed reduced levels of pancreatic enzymes: serum amylase 3 U/L (reference range 10–65), serum lipase 8 U/L (13–60) and faecal elastase < 15 µg/g (> 200), consistent with exocrine pancreatic insufficiency. Endocrine pancreatic function was normal: HbA1c 41 mmol/mol (20–42) and fasting C-peptide 431 pmol/L (375–1,480). The patient had no known pancreatic disease or history of harmful alcohol consumption.

Cancer immunotherapy is associated with immune-related adverse events that can potentially affect any organ system, but exocrine pancreatic insufficiency is uncommon (1–3). The underlying pathogenesis remains unclear, but activation of CD8-positive T cells with subsequent autoimmune destruction of exocrine pancreatic tissue may play a role.

The patient was started on pancreatic enzyme replacement therapy. At an eight-week follow-up, body weight had increased by 4 kg, and stool consistency and frequency had normalised. Diarrhoea following immunotherapy is often – but not always – attributable to colitis, and in cases of steatorrhea, exocrine pancreatic insufficiency should be considered as a differential diagnosis.

The patient has consented to publication of the article.

The article has been peer-reviewed.

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