Aluminum Phosphide Poisoning and Blast in Gastric Tube; A Case Report

FAIZ AHMAD¹, MOHD KALEEM KHAN²*, ASAD MAHMOOD³, JAMAL AZMAT⁴

1. Assistant Professor, Department of Forensic Medicine, J.N.M.C.H., A.M.U., Aligarh India
2. Medical Officer, Trauma center, J.N.M.C.H., A.M.U., Aligarh, India
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Forensic Medicine, J. N. Medical College, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India
4. Assistant Professor, A.K.T. College, AMU Aligarh., India

Abstract

Background: Suicide by poisoning is the second most common cause of death by suicide (27.9%) as per The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) India in 2015. Aluminum phosphide (ALP) is the leading agricultural poison used to commit suicide as where its availability is not properly regulated. ALP is a highly toxic solid fumigant pesticide, rodenticide and insecticide.

Case presentation: A 40-year-old woman was brought by the police to the emergency section. Her extremities were cold and hypotonic, and her skin was pale. Patient’s vitals were unstable with pulse rate 112/minute irregularities, blood pressure 68/54 mm Hg, respiratory rate 22/minute shallow and body temperature 30.1 °C and characteristically strong garlicky odor on her breath. During the suction of gastric contents, spontaneous ignition of gas with flames and white fumes with sound like a blast was observed by resident doctors and para-clinical staff. Gastric aspirate along with Ryle’s tube were immediately sent to the forensic department where the Silver Nitrate test was performed and it was found strongly positive for phosphine gas.

Discussion: Aluminum phosphide readily reacts with water and hydrochloric acid in the stomach to produce phosphine (hydrogen phosphide, PH₃) and a small amount of diposphine.

Conclusion: The present case report stresses on the need that the emergency physicians need to be highly alert and adequately prepared while handling such patients. Spontaneous ignition with the release of phosphine from ALP poisoned patients can not only affect the patient, but also pose a health hazard to emergency physicians and medical staff.

Keywords: Aluminium Phosphide; Pesticide; Phosphine; Spontaneous Ignition; Suicide

INTRODUCTION

Suicide by poisoning is the second most common cause of death by suicide (27.9%) as per The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) India in 2015(1). Aluminum phosphide (ALP) is the leading agricultural poison used to commit suicide as where its availability is not properly regulated (2). ALP is a highly toxic solid fumigant pesticide, rodenticide and insecticide. It is commonly used as an indoor and outdoor pesticide in developing countries like India, Pakistan, Srilanka and Iran because it is a cheap, effective, free from toxic residue and dose not alter the viability of seeds (3-7). In India, it is marketed as a tablet in the name of Alphos, Celphos, Quickphos, Phosphotek, Phosphume, etc., and available as dark brown or grayish green tablets of 3 g each and also available as pellets, granules and as powder, sealed in tens and twenties in airtight aluminium containers (8).

Each tablet is composed of pure ALP (active ingredient 56%) and ammonium carbamate / carbonate / urea (inert ingredient 44%) which releases CO₂ and NH₃ gases preventing the self-ignition of phosphine gas. On coming in contact with moisture, each (3g) tablet of aluminium phosphide liberates 1g of phosphine gas, which is the toxic principle of ALP poisoning.⁷ The fatal dose of ALP is around 0.5 g and acute poisoning with ALP occurs either due to intentional ingestion of an ALP tablet for committing suicide or accidental inhalation of PH₃ gas. Death has been reported when people were travelling in fumigated boxcars containing grains fumigated with aluminum phosphate (7).

Phosphine gas is highly flammable and very toxic in nature (9, 10). Phosphine on coming in contact with atmospheric air may ignite spontaneously and burn with white fumes causing health hazards such as burns in poisoned patient as well as in health care professionals (11, 12). The purpose of the present case study is to spread awareness among emergency physicians and staff regarding rare but dangerous complications of ALP intoxication which liberate phosphine.

CASE REPORT

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The available preparation of ALP tablets has a noticeable odor and is incompatible with oxidizing agents, which means it induces adverse reactions (22). Potassium permanganate is recommended in ALP poisoning to convert phosphine to phosphate (26), but it is an oxidizing agent and when in contact with organic matter, it is reduced to manganese dioxide and the very corrosive potassium hydroxide (20, 26, 27). This reaction is also exothermic and may have contributed in increasing injury as well as the occurrence of ignition events. However, it is suggested that negative pressure during gastric suctioning may contribute to the ignition (27, 28).

CONCLUSION

The present case report stresses on the need that the emergency physicians need to be highly alert and adequately prepared while handling such patients. Spontaneous ignition with the release of phosphine from ALP poisoned patients can not only affect the patient, but also pose a health hazard to emergency physicians and medical staff.

Forensic pathologist should take into the consideration that the signs of burn in the face and neck of the deceased may not be misleading at autopsy.

Conflict of interest:

The authors certify that they have no affiliations with or involved with institution at any time receiving payment or services from a third party (government, commercial, private foundation, etc.) for any aspect of the submitted work (including but not limited to grants, data monitoring board, study design, manuscript preparation, statistical analysis, etc.). Further that there are no patents, whether planned, pending or issued, broadly relevant to the work discussed in this manuscript.

REFERENCES


