

Erythema Multiforme complex

AETIOLOGY AND PATHOGENESIS

Erythema multiforme (EM) complex is a group of rare, immune-mediated dermatoses with varied clinical signs.

The pathogenesis is not completely understood, but it is thought to represent a specific immune-mediated assault on skin cells causing premature skin cell death.

Mild lesions are most commonly idiopathic or associated with infections (especially canine distemper virus) and neoplasia, whereas severe lesions are more commonly associated with drug reactions.

CLINICAL FEATURES

Erythema Multiforme typically presents with variable red to pink colored bumps or plaques in the skin which are often arranged in annular, arcuate, or polycyclic shapes. Occasionally lesions may have scaling or crusting. In some cases there may be lesions in the mouth. Severely affected dogs can be in considerable pain, have an elevated temperature, be depressed and can become dehydrated.

DIFFERENTIAL DIAGNOSES

- Superficial and deep bacterial infection
- Superficial and deep fungal infection
- Demodectic mange
- Pemphigus foliaceus and vulgaris
- Bullous pemphigoid
- Drug eruption (remember that drug reactions can trigger lesions of the EM complex)
- Systemic lupus erythematosus
- Epitheliotropic lymphoma
- Thermal or chemical burns

DIAGNOSTIC TESTS

The history and clinical signs are highly suggestive, and the diagnosis can be confirmed by biopsy of early lesions.



MANAGEMENT

EM can be a challenging condition to manage. The prognosis is better if the inciting cause can be identified and removed. Some cases of EM can spontaneously resolve or wax and wane. The role of steroids is controversial as some cases do not seem to respond. There are anecdotal reports of successful therapy with Atopica or pentoxifylline. Long-term maintenance treatment may be necessary in idiopathic cases.

Severe cases with widespread ulceration should receive intravenous fluid therapy to combat dehydration and shock. The ulcers should be cleaned and protected with silver sulfadiazine cream and bandages. Consideration should also be given to analgesia and antibiotics to prevent sepsis, although this must be weighed against the risk of potentiating a drug reaction.

KEY POINTS

- In many cases it is difficult to determine the exact cause and long term management may be required.