

The patient is a 30 year-old caucasian female. She had started varenicline (Champix®) therapy for smoking cessation. The patient was concurrently taking once daily doses of paroxetine (20 mg) and hydrochlorothiazide (25 mg). Ten days into the treatment, she began to experience discomfort in her chest. She would feel a dull ache between her shoulder blades, and tight, lingering pressure across her chest. The patient described feeling as though she had “indigestion, but worse.” The symptoms would come and go each day. The patient did not take any other medication during these episodes to try and abate the symptoms. Around day 19 of her therapy, the patient experienced an episode of sharp, cramping, spasmodic pain in her chest. Again, she did not take any medication for the symptoms.

The patient was becoming concerned because of a family history of heart problems at an early age. Approximately one month after beginning varenicline, she contacted her pharmacist to inquire about potential side effects of varenicline therapy. A pharmacy student from the pharmacy conducted an interview with the patient to gather the appropriate information. Chest discomfort is a rare side effect of varenicline therapy. It was decided that her symptoms were not due to interactions with her other medications, so the student contacted the Saskatchewan Drug Information Hotline to inquire about varenicline and adverse events. Pfizer, the manufacturer of Champix®, was also contacted for information. Neither had information regarding varenicline and potential heart problems. The patient was referred to her local physician, who looked at the patient’s blood work, EKG and chest x-ray. All appeared normal.

The patient was advised by her pharmacist and physician to either decrease the dose she was taking or to discontinue the drug entirely. The patient was reluctant to stop taking varenicline as it had been working quite well for smoking cessation. However, she decided it would be in her best interest to discontinue the drug and try something else. The patient stopped taking varenicline the day after her visit with the doctor. She started nicotine replacement therapy with Nicorette® gum.

Within two days of stopping her varenicline therapy, the ache and pressure in her chest were gone. The patient is continuing with nicotine replacement therapy, but has switched over to the patch.

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Reference Used:  
CPS 2008 edition