Nicotine staining of the hair and nails

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CLINICAL CHALLENGE

Patients are not always forthcoming about their tobacco use. Smoking and other forms of tobacco use have serious health consequences, and many dermatologic diseases and treatments are negatively affected by tobacco exposure. When a patient does not disclose their full tobacco history, the dermatologist can miss a valuable opportunity to counsel the patient on tobacco cessation. In addition, tobacco use assessment and tobacco cessation intervention are clinical quality measures for physicians to report for stage-1 meaningful use according to Medicare and Medicaid; therefore an accurate tobacco use history is needed for documentation in the electronic medical record.

SOLUTION

Even if a patient denies tobacco use, the dermatologist can notice subtle yellowing of the hair and nails in smokers. This finding can be particularly useful in patients who mask the odor of tobacco by using mouthwash or body fragrances. Pointing out this finding during routine physical examination can start a nonthreatening conversation with the patient about tobacco use and provide a chance for intervention. The patient may not even be aware of the color changes and can be encouraged that the yellowing will resolve with discontinuation of smoking. The yellowing of the hair and nails is likely a direct effect of the nicotine contained in tobacco smoke. Tobacco cessation should be encouraged in all patients who use tobacco products, and these patients should also be counseled on the harmful effects of tobacco that extend beyond the superficial changes of the hair and nails.
Fig 1. A female patient with yellowing of the nails on the right hand, and a subtle yellow streak in her hair. This patient has a 50 pack-year smoking history and currently smokes 1 pack of cigarettes a day. She admits to often holding the pose depicted in this photograph while smoking.

Fig 2. A male patient with perioral yellowing of the mustache and beard hair. This patient has a 45 pack-year smoking history and smokes 1 pack of cigarettes a day.

REFERENCE