

A Pain in the Rectum: Syphilis Manifesting as Proctitis

Peter Stawinski, MD, Karolina Dziadkowiec, MD, Jason Rocha, MD
The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio

Introduction

Anorectal syphilis is challenging to diagnose due to the often, atypical clinical presentation and asymptomatic disease course. We present a unique case of rectal bleeding and diarrhea secondary to anorectal syphilis.

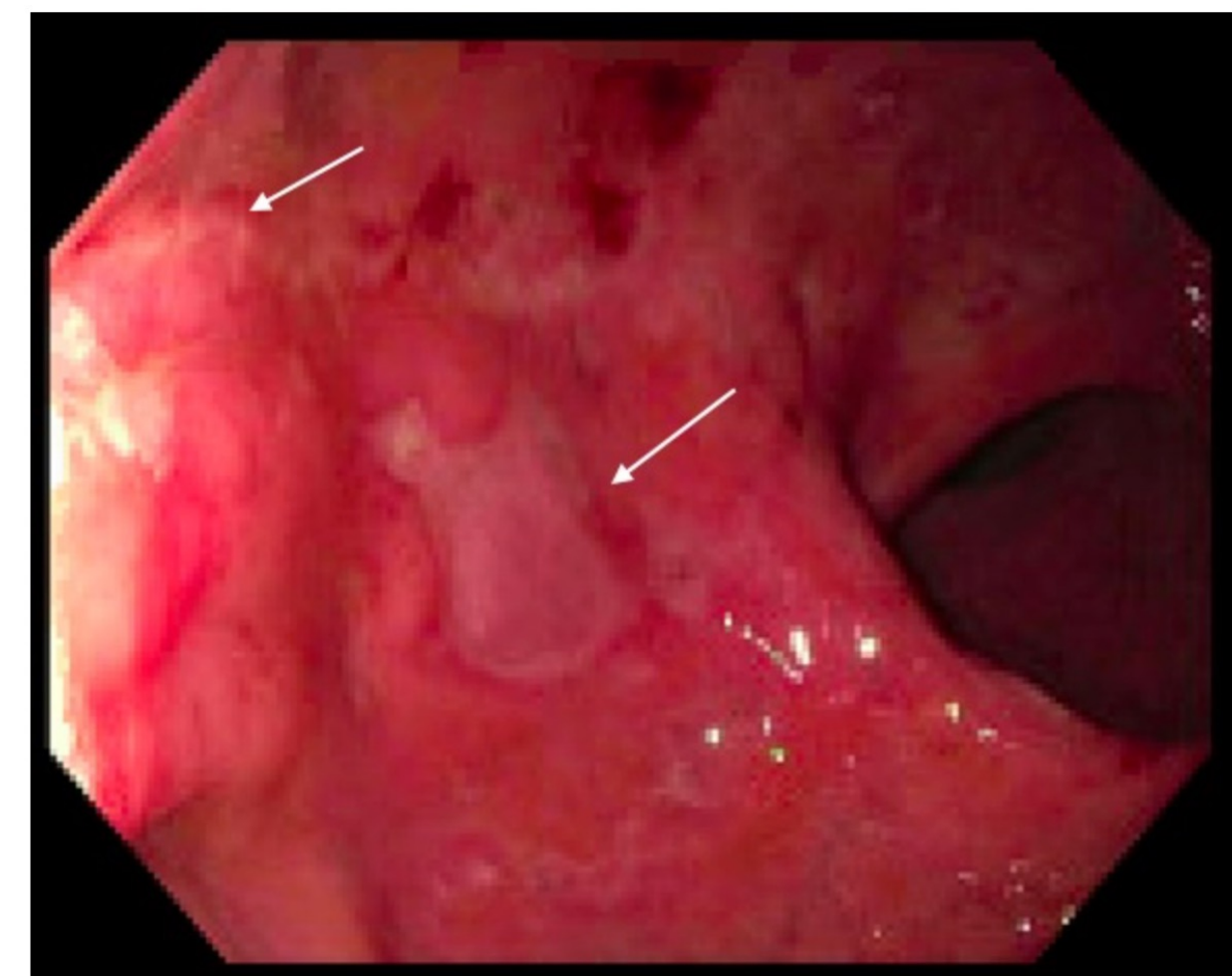
Case Description

- A 31-year old man with a past medical history of untreated HIV and Factor V Leiden deficiency presented to the ER with a 1 month history of rectal bleeding, abdominal pain and diarrhea.
- Vital signs were within normal limits on presentation. Physical exam was notable for palpable tenderness in the lower quadrants without guarding or rebound tenderness. Digital rectal exam was negative for blood, stool, visible lesions or ulcerations.
- Laboratory studies revealed Hemoglobin of 15.g/dL and HIV CD4 count of 877 per mL. Liver tests and chemistries were within normal limits.
- Computed tomography (CT) of the abdomen revealed mucosal thickening of the rectum with mild fat stranding consistent with inflammation.
- Colonoscopy revealed multiple shallow ulcerations confined to the rectum. Biopsies of the ulcers showed active proctitis with spirochetes on immunostaining.
- Penicillin G was initiated. The patient had resolution of his hematochezia and abdominal pain.

Anorectal syphilis is uncommon, but in rare cases can present with scattered ulcerations causing proctitis.

Discussion

Syphilitic proctitis can present clinically as: pain on defecation, intermittent rectal bleeding and diarrhea. Diagnosis of syphilis is based on clinical findings, serological testing and in some cases, tissue biopsy. Primary disease usually occurs at the exterior anal verge, at points of sexual contact. Our case describes syphilitic ulcerations scattered within the rectum without exterior involvement, making it a highly unusual presentation. In summary, high risk sexual behavior or immunocompromised patient populations clinical suspicion should be high for sexually transmitted infections that affect the anorectal region.



Multiple scattered ulcerations in the rectum (white arrows).