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Hyperventilation as a somatoform respiratory disorder in adolescents

L Caballero Fedriani E Martínez-Cayuelas G del-Río Camacho



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Title: Hyperventilation as a somatoform respiratory disorder in adolescents

Clinical image

Authors: Caballero Fedriani L¹, Martínez-Cayuelas E^{1,2}(0000-0001-7375-9657), del-Río Camacho G^{1,2} (0000-0002-9401-1864).

Filiation: Pediatrics department¹ and Multidisciplinary Sleep Unit².

University Hospital Fundación Jiménez Díaz, Madrid.

Corresponding author:

Lourdes Caballero Fedriani

Pediatrics department. University Hospital Fundación Jiménez Díaz

Avda. Reyes Católicos nº 2, 28040 Madrid

lourdes.caballero@quironsalud.es

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A 14-year-old adolescent was referred from neuropsychiatry due to an abnormal respiratory pattern. The patient reported daily episodes of hyperventilation over the past two years, not directly associated with stressful triggers but typically ceasing with distraction and absent during sleep. Subjective dyspnea and other psychiatric symptoms were also present. Despite clinical suspicion of a somatoform respiratory disorder, additional tests, including a chest X-ray and respiratory functional tests, were performed and returned normal results. A nocturnal polysomnography revealed an irregular respiratory pattern while awake, with decreased CO₂ levels (Figures 1a and 1b). Upon sleep onset, as voluntary control of the respiratory center ceased, a compensatory pause of up to 76 seconds occurred, allowing CO₂ levels to normalize, followed by regular breathing that persisted throughout the night. Based on these findings, the diagnosis was confirmed. A multidisciplinary approach involving neurology, psychiatry, and psychological therapy was initiated. After starting treatment with

fluoxetine and lorazepam, the episodes resolved. Somatoform disorders encompass a heterogeneous group of conditions, well classified by Grüber et al¹, with dysfunctional breathing as a common feature². These disorders should be considered when encountering patients with recurrent symptoms not explained by structural abnormalities.

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Figure legend:

Figure: 1.a: A 5-minute epoch nocturnal polysomnography (Somnoscreen Plus (Somnomedics-Germany)). The black box above the upper hypnogram shows the sleep stage the patient is in. The side bracket marks the respiratory sensors (nasal airflow via thermistor, respiratory effort signals (thoracic, abdominal and RIP sum belts), and oxygen saturation). At the beginning a completely irregular breathing pattern can be observed while the patient is awake. As the sleep begins, in the first half of the epoch we can see episodes of prolonged absence of flow with no respiratory effort throughout the events (central apnea), lasting up to 76 seconds, followed by a decrease in oxygen saturation up to 72%. The record shows a stable and regular pattern at the end of the epoch, which continues until the end of the night. 1.b: Summary recording of transcutaneous pCO₂ (Sentec Digital Monitoring System, Switzerland) and oxygen saturation throughout the night. On the left side, the overall values for the night are shown; the right side shows the graphic record. Lower black arrows show the onset of sleep (23:45:27). Before that moment, the pCO₂ values, as shown by the curve, are greatly decreased (22 mmHg). As sleep begins these values increase progressively (coinciding with the prolonged central apnea shown in figure 1) and once normal values are reached (35 mmHg), breathing is resumed and both CO₂ and oxygen saturation remain normal, until the end of the night.

