

# Bullosis Diabeticorum: A Rare Presentation with Immunoglobulin G (IgG) Deposition Related Vasculopathy. Case Report and Focused Review

Authors' Contribution:  
Study Design A  
Data Collection B  
Statistical Analysis C  
Data Interpretation D  
Manuscript Preparation E  
Literature Search F  
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**Patient:** Male, 42  
**Final Diagnosis:** Bullosis diabeticorum  
**Symptoms:** Skin rash  
**Medication:** —  
**Clinical Procedure:** Debridement  
**Specialty:** Metabolic Disorders and Diabetics

**Objective:** Rare co-existence of disease or pathology

**Background:** Bullosis diabeticorum (BD) is a condition characterized by recurrent, spontaneous, and non-inflammatory blistering in patients with poorly controlled diabetes mellitus. While etiopathogenesis remains unclear, roles of neuropathy, vasculopathy and UV light are hypothesized. Most literature reports negative direct and indirect immunofluorescence findings in diabetics with bullous eruptions. Porphyria cutanea tarda, bullous pemphigoid, epidermolysis bullosa, and pseudoporphyria are other differential diagnoses of bullous lesions, and they must be excluded.

**Case Report:** We present a 42-year-old African American male with long standing poorly controlled insulin dependent diabetes mellitus with blisters on his left hand and feet. The blisters were noticed three weeks prior to presentation and, thereafter, rapidly increased in size and spontaneously ruptured. Physical examination revealed a multitude of both roofed and unroofed bullous painless skin lesions. Hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) staining dramatized the dermal-epidermal blistering and re-epithelization process. Direct Immunofluorescence (DIF) was positive for 2 + IgG deposition in the already thickened basement membrane of the capillaries of the superficial vascular plexus. After debridement, his wounds greatly improved with over three months of aggressive wound care.

**Conclusions:** Primary immunologic abnormality likely plays no role in the onset of BD. To date, only one article has reported nonspecific capillary-associated immunoglobulin M and C3. This is the first case of BD with IgG deposition in the superficial capillary basement membrane. Positive findings on DIF suggest vasculopathy. Dermal microangiopathy, secondary to immunologic abnormality, is a possible underlying pathogenesis to bullae formation. Punch biopsy with DIF can be an additional diagnostic modality in the management of such cases.

**MeSH Keywords:** Blister • Diabetes Complications • Diabetic Angiopathies • Fluorescent Antibody Technique, Direct • Vasculitis

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## 1 Background

Bullosis diabeticorum (BD) is a condition characterized by recurrent, spontaneous, and non-inflammatory blistering on patients with poorly controlled diabetes mellitus. Cases occur rapidly and are especially common in distal distributions. Bullous lesions in diabetic patients were first reported by Kramer in 1930 [1]. Cantwell and Martz further described BD in 1967 [2]. Bullous disease of diabetes occurs in about 0.5% of diabetics in the United States. BD has a male-to-female ratio of 2: 1 and an age range of 17 to 84 years [3]. One Indian study showed BD's prominence in 2% of the Indian diabetic population [4].

The exact etiology is unknown, but it is thought to be multifactorial [5]. The role of neuropathy, nephropathy, vasculopathy, and UV (ultraviolet) light are hypothesized [3]. Currently, there is no literature that accurately portrays the relationship between the occurrence of diabetic bulla and the degree of metabolic derangement or glycemic control. BD most likely arises in conjunction with the numerous complications of poorly controlled diabetes [3]. Usually acral distributions of blisters or bullous lesions suggest changes related to a susceptibility to trauma or peripheral neuropathy [6]. This case supports vasculopathy as a likely cause of bullous lesions in diabetics. Healing of bullous lesions occurs spontaneously after two to six weeks. Antibiotics and/or extensive wound care is warranted if secondary infections occur. However, aspiration of bullous lesions might help to prevent accidental rupture and subsequent complications.

BD is diagnosed by a system of elimination. In diabetics with bullous eruptions, most literature reports negative direct and indirect immunofluorescence microscopy findings [7]. Clinicians should consider microscopic investigations to rule out other differentials of diabetic bullae (e.g., see Table 1 for differential diagnoses) that typically are positive for various complement and immunoglobulin deposition along the dermo-epidermal junction [3]. We report the first case of BD with IgG (Immunoglobulin gamma) deposition in the superficial capillary basement membrane.

**Table 1.** Differential diagnosis.

1. Bullous pemphigoid
2. Epidermolysis bullosa
3. Epidermolysis bullosa acqusta
4. Porphyria cutanea tarda
5. Pseudoporphyria
6. Drug-induced bullous disorders

## Case Report

A 42-year old African American male with long standing poorly controlled insulin dependent diabetes mellitus presented to the emergency department with blisters on his left hand and feet. The blisters were first noticed three weeks before his admittance to the hospital. The patient's past medical history, including end-stage renal disease and peripheral neuropathy, was significant to the case as well. The blisters rapidly increased in size and spontaneously ruptured. The patient denied any recent trauma, contact with pesticides, insect bites, UV light exposure, or long-distance travel. During physical examination, the patient was noted to have a multitude of both roofed and unroofed bullous, painless skin lesions (Figure 1A, 1B). His glycosylated hemoglobin (HbA1c) was 10.7% on admission. The patient was taking the following medications at home: aspirin 81 mg PO (per oral) daily, carvedilol 6.25 mg PO BID (two times a day), insulin lispro 0–11 units subcutaneous TID (three times a day), lisinopril 5 g PO daily, ramelteon 8 mg PO nightly, sevelamer 1600 mg PO TID.

Dermatology was consulted. The asymptomatic nature of bullous eruptions favored BD in uncontrolled diabetes. Bullous pemphigoid was less likely, given his age, lack of pain, and pruritus. Other differentials of bullous lesions were excluded with extensive investigations, including perilesional biopsy with direct immunofluorescence. Hematoxylin and eosin (H&E) staining (Figure 2A) dramatized the dermal-epidermal blistering and re-epithelization process. Furthermore, only a few inflammatory cells were found within the blister space. Rare neutrophils and lymphocytes were noted in the superficial dermis without deep infiltrate. Subsequently, DIF (Figure 2B) was positive for 2 + IgG deposition in the already thickened basement membrane of superficial capillaries of the superficial vascular plexus. Finally, dermatology confirmed diagnosis of BD.

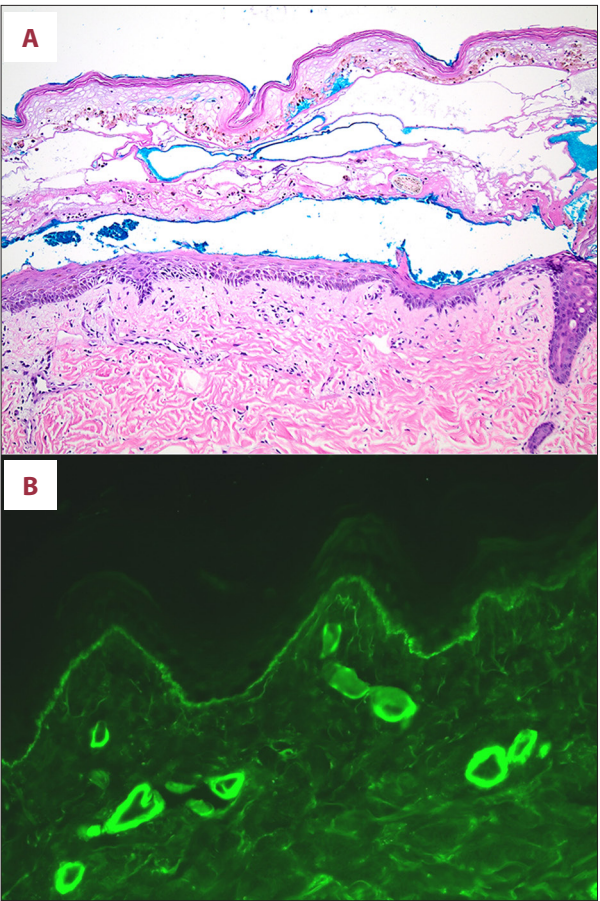
He completed a six-week course of intravenous vancomycin (15 mg/kg once 24 hourly) and ceftazidime (1 g once 24 hourly) due to the presence of a local secondary superinfection. General surgery was consulted and performed a debridement of the skin wounds. He continued to have leukocytosis, and Infectious Disease (ID) was consulted. ID recommended four weeks of vancomycin and ceftazidime. He continued to spike fevers and had leukocytosis. His wounds had greatly improved throughout hospitalization, but were still significant. Upon discontinuation of antibiotics after a four-week course, he spiked a fever. He was then restarted on vancomycin and ceftazidime. This course ended when he was finished with three times debridement. The patient's wounds greatly improved with over three months of aggressive wound care.



**Figure 1.** (A) Left hand: roofed and unroofed partial and full thickness blisters. (B) Both legs and feet: roofed and unroofed partial and full thickness blisters.

## Discussion

In diabetic bullae, blisters occur suddenly, often overnight, without any apparent cause, and typically without known history of recent trauma.



**Figure 2.** (A) H&E staining of a perilesional skin biopsy showing the dermal-epidermal blistering and re-epithelization process along with a few inflammatory cells within blister space. (B) Direct immunofluorescence of a perilesional skin biopsy positive for 2+ IgG deposition.

## Characteristics of lesions

Blisters tend to be painless and non-pruritic, like those experienced in this case. Rarely, the blisters can cause mild discomfort. Tense and non-tender blisters on non-erythematous skin mainly characterize bullous lesions. In this case, extensive roofed and unroofed bullous lesions were noted on initial presentation. Sometimes blisters have a tendency to be large with irregular margins and flaccid that imitates burn lesions. As described in this case, site of bullae formation is mainly distal distributions in both extremities especially lower, but blisters rarely occur in non-acral sites [3].

## Pathogenesis

The etiopathogenesis of BD is multifactorial. For example, among diabetics and non-diabetics, patients with known history of diabetes are shown to have a lower threshold for occurrence of blister due to suction. Other factors could be vibration,



1 high temperature, and long-standing pressure on the proximal  
lower extremities [8,9]. In individuals with nephropathy, UV ex-  
posure might contribute to the underlying mechanism of blister  
development [10]. There is no direct correlation between  
5 glycemic control and bullae formation. Many patients with neph-  
ropathy and/or neuropathy are reported to have diabetic bul-  
lae, as shown in this case. Due to hyaline deposition of capil-  
lary wall on biopsy findings, some researchers have started to  
speculate that vasculopathy might lead to induction of blister  
10 formation [3]. Interest in the skin manifestations of diabetic  
microangiopathy began in 1964 when Bauer et al. observed  
periodic acid-Schiff (PAS) positive capillary basement mem-  
brane thickening (CBMT) in necrobiosis lipoidica diabetorum  
(NLD) [11]. Kurwa et al. suggested that BD may also be caused  
15 by diabetic microangiopathy [12]. The positive findings with  
DIF from this case are in general agreement with this theory.

## Workup

### 20 *Light microscopy with H&E staining*

Few case reports have described the separation of the sub-cor-  
neal, intra-epidermal, and sub-epidermal locations of a biopsy  
after H&E staining. Through electron microscopy, the separation  
25 at a sub-epidermal location is seen at the lamina lucida level [3].  
Although there are no significant changes, a few literature re-  
ports describe that sometimes the epidermis shows abnormal  
accumulation of fluid (spongiosis), but there is no breakdown of  
cell layer (acantholysis) and degeneration of keratinocytes [13].  
30 Blisters can be seen in various stages of healing during presenta-  
tion because of re-epithelization. The bullae usually contain ster-  
ile proteinaceous fluid without any inflammatory components [3].

### *Immunofluorescence studies*

35 Direct immunofluorescence is a useful supplement for the ac-  
curate diagnosis and classification of various autoimmune bul-  
lous disorders (see Table 1 for differential diagnosis). When  
clinical features and histopathology are inconclusive, the diag-  
40 nosis can often be made based on DIF findings alone. A com-  
bination of the clinical features, histopathology, and DIF usu-  
ally procures the best results [14]. As it is difficult to rule out  
all the differential diagnoses of BD clinically, immunofluores-  
cence studies on skin biopsy may be needed. Porphyria cuta-  
45 nea tarda shows deposition of PAS-positive diastase resistant  
mucopolysaccharides and immunoglobulins in and around the  
superficial dermal blood vessels and at the basement mem-  
brane zone. Porphyrias typically exhibit caterpillar bodies [15].  
In epidermolysis bullosa, immune mapping shows antibodies  
50 to the hemidesmosomal antigen and lamina densa protein  
(e.g., type IV collagen) at the dermo-epidermal junction [16].  
Bullous pemphigoid and epidermolysis bullosa acquisita usu-  
ally exhibit a linear band of immunoglobulin G deposit along

the dermo-epidermal junction [17]. A U-serrated pattern is typ- 1  
ical of epidermolysis bullosa acquisita, whereas a N-serrated  
pattern is typical of pemphigoid [3].

Primary immunologic abnormality plays no role in BD. In patients 5  
with bullous eruptions of diabetes mellitus, findings from both  
direct and indirect immunofluorescence examinations of the  
skin are negative. One article has reported nonspecific capil-  
lary-associated immunoglobulin deposition in BD [18]. Our case  
has shown positive direct perivascular immunofluorescence in 10  
involved tissue with IgG deposition in superficial capillary base-  
ment membrane. This suggests microangiopathy, secondary  
to immunologic abnormality, as the underlying pathogenesis.

## *Treatment approach*

Since the condition is self-limiting, there is no specific treatment.  
Blisters typically heal spontaneously within two to six weeks, but  
chances of recurrence are high either in the same or different 20  
sites. Although bullous lesions often are cured without scar for-  
mation, they can convert into ulceration [10]. There is also liter-  
ature showing an association between osteomyelitis and bullous  
disease of diabetes [19]. Some lesions in our case had secondary  
infections needing debridement. To prevent possible secondary  
polymicrobial infection, patients with confirmed BD should be 25  
observed closely until lesions heal completely. Antibiotics only  
play a role if secondary infection is present. Although secondary  
infection may develop, patients with diabetic bullae have a bet-  
ter prognosis [3]. To prevent accidental rupture and subsequent  
complications, aspiration of blisters as well as immobilization may 30  
be required. Incision/debridement and possible split skin grafting  
may be helpful in the case of secondary tissue destructions [3].

## Conclusions

BD requires meticulous clinical assessment and pathologic corre- 35  
lation to distinguish it from similar conditions. Positive findings  
of DIF are usually suggestive of underlying vasculopathy. Punch  
biopsy with DIF can be an additional diagnostic tool. These le- 40  
sions require detailed assessment and standard diabetic wound  
care with early interventions to prevent secondary infections and  
ulcer development. Awareness of BD is crucial for early recogni-  
tion and avoidance of unnecessary investigations and treatment.

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## Conflict of Interest

None.

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