

University of Wisconsin: UW Health dermatologist researching “COVID toes” in children

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MADISON, Wis. – A team of researchers at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health is studying how the skin condition referred to as “COVID toes” is connected to the virus; whether it is symptom of a COVID-19 infection or an immune response to the virus.

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, pediatric dermatologists at UW Health and elsewhere saw a surge of red to purple bruise-like blisters and bumps on otherwise healthy children. Doctors soon hypothesized there could be a link between the painful purple blistered toes and COVID-19, so the term “COVID toes” was coined and began making headlines.

Doctors know that the red and purple lesions are connected to a rare skin condition (called chilblains) that results in a higher level of protein (type 1 interferons) that helps kill off viral infections. High levels of type 1 interferons are vital in killing COVID-19. Patients with severe COVID-19 infections have low levels of type 1 interferon, and commercially available interferons are currently being investigated in clinical trials to treat patients with COVID-19.

“By studying children with COVID-toes, we aim to investigate a critical immune response that may protect people against COVID-19,” said Dr Lisa Arkin, assistant professor of dermatology and pediatrics at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health and study leader. “At UW Health, all of the children with COVID toes have been healthy and lacked both current and previous symptoms of COVID-19. We want to better understand how their immune system may have been able to combat the virus.”

The study will consist of collecting samples from all participants, including blood, saliva, and archived tissue from previous procedures.

“Our approach is unique, instead of studying the sickest patients we aim to study those that stayed relatively healthy, once we figure that out we can use this science to treat the sickest most vulnerable patients,” said Dr. Beth Drolet, chair of dermatology at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. “We have leading experts in dermatology, immunology, rheumatology, genetics and virology all working together to get answers as fast as we can.”

To learn more about how to participate in this research study, please call (608) 287-2640 or (608) 287-2006 or email clinicaltrials@dermatology.wisc.edu.

Interviews are available upon request.