HEADACHES, RAPIDLY PROGRESSIVE VISUAL LOSS, AND BILATERAL DISC EDema

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The diagnosis and management of a 28-year-old obese woman who presented with neck pain, headache, and rapidly progressive visual loss is discussed here. Results of her initial general examination were normal. Thorough medical follow-up resulted in a rare diagnosis.


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A 28-year-old obese woman presented with headaches and had visual loss associated with bilateral papilledema. Eight days prior, she had developed a sudden severe neck pain and headaches. Two days later, she became severely nauseated and presented to an emergency room where the results of her general examination were normal; she was sent home on antiemetics and pain medication. Three days later, she had a syncope at home and noticed decreased vision in both eyes. Again, she presented to an emergency room where the results of a head computed tomography (CT) scan without contrast were normal. She was again sent home, and a neurologic consultation was arranged. The next day, her headaches persisted and the vision loss worsened. The consulted neurologist sent her to an ophthalmologist who found profound visual loss in both
An ophthalmologist found profound visual loss in both eyes, and florid bilateral optic nerve head edema prompting an emergent neuro-ophthalmologic consultation.

On initial neuro-ophthalmologic evaluation, blood pressure was normal, visual acuity testing was reduced to “no light perception” vision in the right eye, and “light perception” vision in the left eye. Pupils were sluggishly responsive to light, extraocular movements were full, and funduscopic examination revealed severe bilateral disc edema with peripapillary hemorrhages and severely dilated veins (Figure 1). Visual fields were very constricted. The patient was immediately transferred to the emergency department, where results of a repeat head CT without contrast were again normal.

What is your differential diagnosis? How should this patient be managed?

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Please turn to page E141 for a diagnosis and discussion of this case.