

Steroids for unborn babies can cause brain damage and death

Women who are considered likely to deliver a baby prematurely are often given a regimen of antenatal corticosteroids, which supposedly speed up development of the fetus' lungs.

Yet, according to several studies presented at a meeting at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), multiple courses of those powerful drugs can pose serious risks for the infant -- including brain damage and even death.

In 1994, the NIH concluded that single course administration of corticosteroids to pregnant women at risk for pre-term delivery reduces the risk of death, respiratory distress syndrome, and brain hemorrhage in their pre-term infants.

It noted, however, that the potential benefits and risks of administering more than one course of antenatal corticosteroids during a pregnancy were unknown and called for additional research on this issue.

Despite the lack of research on the topic and the NIH's warning, many doctors have been giving women multiple treatments of the drug.

"In recent years, our recommendation for administering corticosteroids to pregnant women at high risk for pre-term delivery has been widely adopted," said panel chair Larry Gilstrap, M.D., of the University of Texas-Houston Medical School. "However, there is increasing evidence that clinicians are administering repeat courses of corticosteroids."

The 16-member panel reviewed all available research on the drug and concluded that, although there may be benefits to the drug during some pregnancies, they may be outweighed by the tremendous risks involved.

Delayed mental development is one of the negative side effects observed in tests. Dr. M. Sean Esplin of the University of Utah Health Sciences Center testified to the panel that in one long-term analysis of 390 infants, researchers noted both severe and mild mental developmental delays and delays in the ability to move in those infants who had received multiple courses of steroids.

"Multiple courses of antenatal corticosteroids are associated with adverse mental and psychomotor development," Esplin said. "Our data raise serious questions about the safety of repeated doses of steroids."

Other experts told the panel of additional side effects, including hyperactive and aggressive behavior which appeared when the children were six years-old. "Repeated courses of antenatal corticosteroids may cause long-lasting effects on behavior," Dr. Noel French of the King Edward Memorial Hospital in Australia warned the panel.

Another expert to testify was Dr. Beverly Banks of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. She presented the results of a study linking three or more courses of steroids to increased mortality and a shorter survival rate due to severe respiratory distress syndrome.

SOURCE: "Antenatal Corticosteroids Revisited: Repeat Courses," National Institutes of Health Consensus Development Conference Statement, August 17-18, 2000.