Common Painkiller Creates a Cause for Alarm During Pregnancy

Scientists warn that acetaminophen might affect fetal development and may lead to serious health problems for children and adults.

November 22, 2021 By Jeanette L. Pinnace

More than half of pregnant women in the United States routinely use over-the-counter (OTC) meds that include acetaminophen. Now, in a consensus statement published in the journal Nature Reviews Endocrinology, a team of 91 health experts from all over the world caution that this common painkiller and fever reducer may be partly to blame for an increase in cognitive, learning and behavioral problems in kids and reproductive disorders in men, reports a press release from the Yale School of Public Health

Acetaminophen, a chemical compound found in more than 600 medications, first became available to U.S. consumers in 1950. Thirty years later, the drug was outselling aspirin and achieved widespread use. Nevertheless, its effectiveness is tainted by murkiness about the exact way the med works and studies that challenge its safety profile, particularly in connection with children's prenatal exposure to the med.

"Our lab was among the first to report a potential harmful effect of acetaminophen on fetal brain development in a large longitudinal human cohort study," said Zeyan Liew, PhD, MPH, an assistant professor in the department of environmental health sciences at Yale School of Public Health (YSPH) and one of the authors of the statement. "It is time to take the growing body of evidence seriously and consider precautionary measures."

Previously, the institution conducted a series of investigations that associated acetaminophen use during pregnancy with a raised risk of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and impairments to memory, thinking and behavioral skills in children.

These studies reviewed data from a long-term inquiry in Denmark involving over 60,000 mothers and kids. In another YSPH investigation that focused on a group of U.S. nurses and their offspring, scientists were able to duplicate the link between pregnant women's use of acetaminophen and ADHD that later developed in the children.

The statement urged that preventive measures be taken against possible negative effects acetaminophen might have on unborn children and more studies to learn more about the drug.

Researchers also suggested that moms-to-be stop acetaminophen use and get an OK from their doctors first, and to opt for the lowest dose of the medicine needed for the least amount of time.

In addition, given the high usage of the drug by pregnant women, “packaging should include warning labels including these recommendations,” scientists stressed.

To learn more about the safety profile of OTC meds, read “How Carcinogens Are Getting Into Over-the-Counter Medications.”

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