

RSM 00016

Reviews of books and studies

Koren G, Bologna M, Long D et al. Perception of teratogenic risk by pregnant women exposed to drugs and chemicals during the first trimester. Am J Obstet Gynecol 1989; 160: 1190–1194.

In this paper Koren and his colleagues examine the perception of teratogenic risk among women participating in a particular antenatal consultation programme. One element in that programme is the provision of advice as to teratogenic risks to women who have actually been exposed to drugs and chemicals. Eighty women were involved in this prospective investigation, 69 of whom had indeed been exposed to non-teratogenic agents and 11 to known or suspected teratogens. The women were asked to assess their own potential risks of giving birth to a child with some major malformation, before and after receiving the advice provided by the programme. No control group was involved. All the women studied were afraid of giving birth to a malformed child, irrespective of whether the agents to which they had been exposed were teratogenic or not; this fear led in some cases to unnecessary termination of pregnancy. The advice provided by the programme did lead to a somewhat decreased perception of risk in the group exposed to non-teratogens, but the risk perception as relating to their own situation remained higher than for the perception of teratogenic risk in the general population.

The authors suggest two reasons for the unrealistically high perception of teratogenic risk. One would be the alarming and misleading information involving drugs and teratogenicity both in the lay media and provided by some physicians. Publications in the mass media usually stress risks and they rarely describe the safety of particular drugs. The other reason could be misperception of the information given, as suggested by the slight effect which the consultation programme exerted on their beliefs.

Interpretation of the data in this study is impeded by the selectivity of the group examined and the lack of a control group. No comparison can be made with risk perception by pregnant women who had been exposed to drugs but did not participate in this ante-natal programme, nor with pregnant women who had not been exposed to any agent. Nevertheless this paper signals a possible side-effect of information available in one way or another to the public about drugs and pregnancy; in some cases it could result in an unnecessary termination of pregnancy, in others in under-utilization of drugs which clearly should be taken (e.g. anticonvulsants and antihypertensive agents). In both situations, women need personal advice and realistic information about their own individual situation. That is not an easy goal to achieve, for the majority of drugs used by pregnant women have not been investigated in humans and little is therefore known about their risks. The way to gain more knowledge of that issue is to look at actual drug use in pregnancy in large populations. Publications should not only focus on the risks of drugs but also devote attention to safe alternatives.

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