Paxil and Pregnancy

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has issued a warning that the antidepressant Paxil may be associated with birth defects. Paxil is a medication used to treat depression, social anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, and panic disorder. Paxil belongs to the class of antidepressants known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or SSRIs which hit the market in 1988 and are widely used today to treat both adults and children. Paxil is also marketed via the generic name of Paroxetine.

Earlier research into the use of Paxil during pregnancy indicated that newborns whose mothers took Paxil during the late stages of pregnancy may suffer a form of withdrawal, called “discontinuation syndrome.” This type of withdrawal doesn’t involve actual addiction to the drug, and is somewhat different from the type of withdrawal experienced by newborns prenatally exposed to alcohol or narcotics. Typical withdrawal involves sweating, gastrointestinal distress, and potential convulsions, reactions not seen with removal of SSRIs such as Paxil. The discontinuation syndrome experienced by newborns prenatally exposed to drugs such as Paxil is marked by respiratory distress, low blood sugar, and jaundice. Many of these babies have to stay in the hospital for two to three weeks after birth, but studies have not yet found any long-term health effects from discontinuation syndrome.

The recent FDA warning was based on a study which found an increased number of babies born with birth defects to women who were taking Paxil during the first trimester of pregnancy when compared to women who were on other antidepressants. The most common defects were cardiovascular and the risks were about 50 percent higher than they were in the general population. The most common of these were

ventricular septal defects, where one or more holes are present in the muscular wall separating the right and left ventricles of the heart. This is the most common congenital heart defect.

Researchers still do not know if the relationship between Paxil and congenital heart defects is a causal one and there is, in general, a paucity of research on the subject. Paxil has previously been classified as a "Category C" drug for pregnant women, meaning that comprehensive studies of its effects on a pregnancy have not been performed. This means that physicians should be talking with their pregnant patients about potential benefits and potential risks regarding Paxil use during their pregnancy.

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