

News

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****Babies of mothers who use cocaine
suffer from prenatally related problems

DALLAS -- Researchers at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas have recently shown that the infants of mothers who are self-admitted cocaine users suffer from certain prenatal-related problems more often than those in a random-sample control group.

The study, which was reported in the January issue of Obstetrics and Gynecology, was done at Parkland Memorial Hospital with 53 women who had used cocaine during their pregnancies. The 100 mothers in the control group also delivered at Parkland, said Dr. Bertis Little, assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at UT Southwestern, and his associates.

Little, a Ph.D. who works in the area of prenatal diagnosis and obstetrical genetics, stated that infants born to mothers who were cocaine abusers tended to be preterm, or premature. In addition, significantly more infants born to mothers who had used cocaine during their pregnancies had more complications at birth, including abnormal heart beat and the presence of the fetus' own fecal matter in the amniotic fluid, which many researchers believe is an indicator of fetal distress.

The study also confirmed that these mothers were more likely to have low-birth-weight babies, a fact that has been reported in previous studies. In addition, the babies of the cocaine-using mothers were born with a significantly increased number of abnormalities, especially heart defects. Congenital abnormalities have also been reported in other studies, but such factors as malnutrition may be involved.

Little said that the birth weight of infants born to cocaine abusers was significantly lower than that of the controls (2,970 grams in the cocaine-influenced babies compared to 3,295 grams in the infants of the control population). In addition, the birth-weight percentiles were widely different when the gestational (developmental) ages at birth were compared. The babies of the non-abusing mothers were at a much higher level of development for their ages than the infants of the mothers who had been using cocaine.

(More)

The study indicated that as many as one in 10 mothers delivering in the Dallas County hospital may be using cocaine, Little said. However, these statistics are in line with reports from other major urban areas that deal with the general population. "We're not saying Dallas has an indigent population that is out there using drugs. People who pay for health care seem to be using cocaine as much if not more. It's a social problem today."

The geneticist estimates that about 10 percent of the babies exposed to drugs in the womb experience withdrawal after birth. Withdrawal symptoms include tachycardia (abnormally fast heart beat), seizures and a hyper-responsive condition in which the child fights being held, refuses to be comforted and continues to cry in a high-pitched wail.

All the cocaine abusers in the study reported using the drug during the first trimester while 77 percent admitted using the drug throughout pregnancy. Of the cocaine-users, 85 percent said they took the drug by intravenous injection, 11 percent "sniffed" it and 4 percent smoked it. The mean age of the abusing mothers was 25.5. Also, more cocaine-abusing mothers admitted taking other drugs than mothers in the control group, the most common being tobacco (55 percent versus 14 percent). Other substances mentioned included marijuana, alcohol, amphetamines, "T's," "blues," heroin, opium and certain over-the-counter drugs.

Little stressed that "much more information is needed to determine the true prevalence as well as the medical significance of cocaine use during pregnancy." And since cocaine is an illegal substance, its use in this and other studies was probably underreported, he said.

Other authors included UT Southwestern faculty members Laura M. Snell, M.P.H., and Larry C. Gilstrap III, M.D.

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Distribution: AA,AB,AC,AC1,AF,AF1,AG,AG1,AH,AI,AK,AK1,ADM,ADM1,TEX,SL

Note: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School.