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Metronidazole (Flagyl[®]) and Pregnancy

This sheet talks about the risks that exposure to metronidazole can have during pregnancy. With each pregnancy, all women have a 3% to 5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your health care provider.

What is metronidazole?

Metronidazole is an antibiotic used to treat different kinds of infections. It is available in oral, rectal, vaginal and topical preparations. Metronidazole is commonly used for vaginal infections for which pregnant women can require treatment. It has been on the market for more than 40 years. Another name for metronidazole is Flagyl[®].

Can taking metronidazole when planning a pregnancy make it more difficult for me to become pregnant?

There is no research addressing this issue; however, there is currently no evidence to suggest that metronidazole would cause difficulties getting pregnant.

Can taking metronidazole during early pregnancy increase the risk for miscarriage?

No. There is one large study that looked at over 4000 pregnancies with exposure to metronidazole early in pregnancy and did not find an increased risk for miscarriage.

Can taking metronidazole during pregnancy cause birth defects or other adverse effects on the baby?

Use of metronidazole has been controversial over the years. Older studies have suggested an association between metronidazole and an increase in various birth defects. However, these studies had flaws that make it difficult to be sure if those birth defects were caused by metronidazole. In contrast, recent studies and reviews that examined the cases of thousands of women exposed to this drug in early pregnancy could find no evidence that using metronidazole during pregnancy increases the risk for major malformations or other adverse effects on the fetus. While some sources still state that this drug should not be used during the first trimester or at all in pregnancy, the current data do not support a significant increased risk for birth defects or other adverse effects on the fetus.

What if I use it topically (on the skin) or vaginally?

Topical preparations of metronidazole are minimally absorbed and not likely to result in a significant level in your blood. However, vaginal use of metronidazole may result in a more significant absorption of the medication into your system. Yet, since the drug is considered safe to use orally, both vaginal and topical use should not pose an increased risk to your pregnancy.

Can I take metronidazole any time during pregnancy?

Currently there is no evidence to suggest that metronidazole places a pregnancy at risk at any stage. For some conditions, metronidazole is the only drug of choice and it is especially important to treat vaginal infections during pregnancy.

I have heard that this drug may cause cancer. Is this true?

Metronidazole has been shown to cause both changes in genetic material and cause cancer in animals. It has not yet been found to have these effects in humans. One study that followed several hundred women for twenty years did not find an increase in cancer.

Can I take metronidazole while breastfeeding?

Metronidazole is excreted into breast milk in relatively large amounts, with some reports of up to 20% of the mother's dose. However, this dose is well below the therapeutic dose given to treat young infants who were able to tolerate this drug with no side effects. In addition, a study of 12 women who were taking metronidazole three times per day did not find adverse effects on the breastfed babies.

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*If you have questions about the information on this fact sheet or other exposures during pregnancy, call **OTIS** at 1-866-626-6847.*