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Benzodiazepines and Pregnancy

This sheet talks about the risks that exposure to benzodiazepines 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 a benzodiazepine?

Benzodiazepines are medications used to treat anxiety, sleeplessness, seizures, muscle spasms, and alcohol withdrawal. Valium[®] (diazepam), Xanax[®] (alprazolam), Klonopin[®] (clonazepam), and Ativan[®] (lorazepam) are just a few but there are many others.

Should I stop taking my benzodiazepine once I find out I'm pregnant?

No. You should always talk to your doctor before making any changes in your medication. If you suddenly stop taking your medication you may have withdrawal and we don't know what effect withdrawal might have on a pregnancy. Your doctor can help you decide if the benefit of taking the medicine outweighs any possible risk to your pregnancy.

I've heard that benzodiazepines can cause birth defects like cleft lip and palate. Is this true?

Some early data in animals and humans suggested a slight increase in the risk for cleft lip and/or cleft palate if a benzodiazepine was taken during the critical time of 7 ½ to 14 weeks of the pregnancy. Since these early reports, there have been studies and reviews that have not supported an association between benzodiazepines and cleft lip or palate or birth defects in general. It is generally felt that

exposure to a benzodiazepine does not significantly increase the risk for birth defects.

I need to continue taking my benzodiazepine medication. Will it cause any adverse effects in my baby after birth?

If you are taking a benzodiazepine near the time of delivery, your baby may have withdrawal symptoms such as not being able to control body temperature, difficulty breathing, muscle weakness, irritability, crying, sleep disturbances, tremors, and jitteriness. It is important that you inform your obstetrician and your baby's pediatrician so extra care can be provided should your baby need it. These symptoms resolve over a period of time as the drug leaves the baby's system and have not appeared to have any long-term adverse effects.

Will taking a benzodiazepine have any effect on my baby's behavior and development?

There has been some animal data suggesting an effect on behavior in the exposed offspring. However, since animals do not always predict the effects in humans no conclusions can be made. Presently, there are no well-done long-term follow-up studies on children exposed to benzodiazepines during pregnancy. However, these drugs have been on the market for more than 40 years and there has been no evidence to suggest that they have long-term adverse effects on the child's brain or development.

Someone told me not to take my benzodiazepine with my allergy medication diphenhydramine. Why not?

In a case report and animal data, the combination of temazepam and diphenhydramine resulted in an increase risk for stillbirth or death shortly after birth. It is presently unknown if this interaction will occur with all benzodiazepines. To be safe, it is best not to take diphenhydramine while you are taking a benzodiazepine.

Can I take benzodiazepines while I am breastfeeding?

The benzodiazepines are secreted into breast milk and their use during breastfeeding is generally not recommended. If a benzodiazepine is needed during breastfeeding it is best to use one that is removed from the body rapidly as they can stay in the body for a long time and can accumulate in the breastmilk. When using a benzodiazepine during breastfeeding, watch your baby closely for sleepiness, low energy, or poor suckling which may be signs your baby is getting too much of the drug. If any of these symptoms are seen, you should discuss them with your pediatrician promptly.

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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.