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Carbamazepine (Tegretol[®]) and Pregnancy

This sheet talks about the risks that exposure to carbamazepine 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 carbamazepine?

Carbamazepine is a medication commonly used to control seizures in the treatment of epilepsy. Carbamazepine is also used in the treatment of bipolar affective disorder, schizophrenia, trigeminal neuralgia and other specific pain disorders. A common brand name for carbamazepine is Tegretol[®].

I have been taking carbamazepine for many years. Can this affect my ability to get pregnant?

Yes. Studies have found that the long-term use of seizure medications in women with seizure disorders is associated with menstrual and infertility problems.

I am taking carbamazepine, but I would like to stop taking it before becoming pregnant. How long does carbamazepine stay in your body?

Each person's ability to break down the medication may be different. When you first start to take carbamazepine, your body breaks it down more slowly than when there has been long-term use. After first starting to take carbamazepine, it may take 5-14 days to clear from your body. After long-term treatment, most of the carbamazepine should be gone from your body 3 - 5 days after the last dose.

Please talk to your doctor before you decide to stop taking carbamazepine. The benefits of taking the medication for your medical condition, and the possible adverse outcomes of not taking it, may outweigh the risk of stopping the use of carbamazepine in pregnancy.

A pregnant woman also should not change seizure medications (anticonvulsants) during pregnancy without the advice of her doctor. Keeping a pregnant woman seizure-free is important. Having a seizure in pregnancy may be harmful to the baby. All anticonvulsant medications appear to have some risks for the exposed fetus. Therefore, the medication which best controls a woman's seizures should be the medication of choice for her pregnancy.

Can taking carbamazepine during my pregnancy cause birth defects?

Many studies have evaluated carbamazepine use for epilepsy during pregnancy. This medication crosses the placenta. In pregnancies exposed to carbamazepine

during the first trimester, a number of human studies have shown a 1% risk for neural tube defects. The general population's risk for having a baby with a neural tube defect, such as spina bifida (an opening in the spine or brain), is 0.1% (1/1000 births). Therefore, taking carbamazepine in the first trimester of pregnancy will increase the risk for having a baby with a neural tube defect.

In addition, some studies have suggested an increase in minor birth defects such as a small nose with a long space between the nose and the upper lip, and small fingernails. Other studies have reported a 2 to 3 times increased risk for major birth defects, such as heart defects and cleft lip, in epileptic women who are taking carbamazepine. Other studies have reported an increased frequency of growth retardation and small head size.

Folic acid, a B vitamin, has been found to reduce the risk for neural tube defects and possibly for other structural birth defects. Because women taking carbamazepine have a higher risk of having a baby with a neural tube defect, it is recommended that all women taking carbamazepine take 4 mg/day of folic acid before becoming pregnant and during pregnancy. This may help reduce the risk of birth defects in pregnancies exposed to carbamazepine.

Can taking carbamazepine during pregnancy affect my baby's development?

Researchers are just beginning to evaluate the development of children who have been exposed to carbamazepine during pregnancy. Some studies have found slightly increased risks for developmental delays in children exposed to carbamazepine versus children not exposed to carbamazepine or other anticonvulsants. Other studies have found no differences in development in exposed children versus unexposed children. Further research is needed to answer this question completely.

I have been taking carbamazepine to control my epilepsy for the last few years and I just found out I am pregnant. What tests are available to see if my baby has spina bifida or other birth defects?

Prenatal testing for neural tube defects (such as spina bifida) is available in pregnancy. This can be done a few different ways. A blood test in the second trimester

can be done to measure the amount of a substance called alpha fetoprotein (AFP) in the mother's blood. This protein is made by the fetal liver and crosses into the mother's blood through the placenta. In cases where there is a small hole in the baby's spine or other body structure, the AFP levels are sometimes higher than normal. Having this blood test around 15 – 20 weeks gestation may help you to know if your baby is at risk. If your AFP level is found to be high, further prenatal testing, such as a specialized ultrasound exam, and/or an amniocentesis, may be offered to you and can help determine if there is an opening in the spine.

An ultrasound that looks specifically at the baby's spine can also detect many neural tube defects. Ultrasounds can frequently detect other structural problems and/or birth defects in the baby as well.

A thorough exam of the baby after birth is also recommended for any woman taking carbamazepine during pregnancy. While there is no prenatal test that can detect all birth defects, combinations of these tests will detect a majority of babies that have neural tube defects. All of these options can be discussed with your health care provider.

What could happen to my baby if I stopped taking my carbamazepine and then had a seizure during my pregnancy?

Approximately one out of three epileptic women experiences an increase in the frequency of seizures during pregnancy. Complications for mother and fetus can depend on how often she has a seizure and how long they last. Epileptic seizures and convulsions could cause the mother and her fetus to have periods where they do not get enough oxygen in their blood. This could potentially lead to brain damage and developmental issues for the child, or could be life-threatening. In addition, a seizure could cause the mother to fall and physically injure herself and her fetus.

Should I stop taking carbamazepine during my pregnancy?

In order to receive the most thorough care during pregnancy, you should contact your health care providers, such as your neurologist and obstetrician, before becoming pregnant to discuss making any changes to your medication or stopping use any time during pregnancy. The benefits of taking carbamazepine for your specific situation must be weighed against the potential risks to the developing fetus.

Are there any other concerns with carbamazepine use during pregnancy?

In rare instances, maternal use of some seizure medications during pregnancy has been associated with bleeding problems in the newborn due to low vitamin K levels. It is recommended that women taking these medications receive vitamin K supplements in the last month of pregnancy and that their infants receive the routine vitamin K supplement at birth. Women taking carbamazepine in pregnancy should consider discussing

this with their obstetrician and their child's pediatrician prior to delivery.

Are there any other concerns during pregnancy for women who have epilepsy?

Women with a seizure disorder have an increased risk for preeclampsia (dangerously high blood pressure). The risk of premature labor is also increased.

Can I take carbamazepine while breastfeeding?

Carbamazepine is excreted into breast milk. However, the amount of carbamazepine found in infant blood is low and does not seem to build up over time. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization consider the drug compatible with breastfeeding.

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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.