Herbal medicines during pregnancy and childhood cancers: an analysis of data from a pregnancy cohort study

To the Editor

Pregnant women using herbs is common in Taiwan and mainland China, but relatively little is known about the safety of taking herbal medicines during pregnancy. Our previous study showed a possible link between the use of specific herbal medicines during the first trimester of pregnancy and an increased risk of specific congenital malformations. Thus, this analysis was conducted to explore the relationship between herbal medicine use during pregnancy and the risk of childhood cancer in resulting offspring.

Pregnant women of 26 weeks or more of gestation who came to the Taipei Municipal Maternal and Child Hospital in Taiwan for prenatal care in 1984–1987 were enrolled in the study. A total of 14551 liveborn infants born to them were followed-up after birth. Exposure data were collected prospectively before delivery. Cancer incidence data was obtained from multiple sources. The risk of cancer related to the use of herbal medicine during pregnancy was estimated with Cox proportional hazard regression.

The mean follow-up of the cohort was 14.9 years. Thirty-two cancer cases were diagnosed during 216,873 person years of follow-up. Taking Coptidis Rhizoma during pregnancy was found to be associated with an increased risk of childhood cancer (adjusted hazard ratio [HR] 2.23, 95% confidence interval [CI] 1.02 to 4.88). Within the diagnostic groups, only brain cancer had sufficient numbers (n = 11) for a separate analysis, and taking Coptidis Rhizoma during pregnancy was found to be associated with an increased risk (adjusted HR 4.79, 95% CI 1.28–17.91), Table 1.

We found evidence for a possible link between the use of Coptidis Rhizoma during pregnancy and increased the risk of childhood cancer, but the finding may be due to the chance because of testing for multiple outcomes. Thus, further research is warrant.

REFERENCES


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