

Antidepressants May Harm Infants' Lungs, Report Says

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Expectant mothers who took antidepressants like Prozac late in their [pregnancy](#) were significantly more likely to give birth to an infant with a rare but serious breathing problem, doctors are reporting today.

The lung disorder, called persistent pulmonary [hypertension](#), strikes 1 to 2 newborns in 1,000, on average, and can be fatal. In babies exposed to antidepressants during the last few months of pregnancy, the study found, the rate was six times as high: 6 to 12 newborns in 1,000.

In a news conference yesterday, Dr. Sandra L. Kweder, an official at the Food and Drug Administration, which was not involved in the research, said that the study results were "very worrisome," and that the agency planned to search its own database of adverse events for further evidence of risk. She said the F.D.A. would consider whether to require manufacturers to make labeling changes and conduct postmarketing studies to clarify the risk.

The findings, published today in The New England Journal of Medicine, are the latest in a series of reports that highlight the tough choices that face millions of women with [depression](#) who are pregnant or plan to be. Untreated maternal depression can also harm a developing fetus, experts say, and last week researchers reported in a study that 68 percent of pregnant women who quit taking antidepressants relapsed, compared with 26 percent of those who stayed on the drugs.

But studies have found that up to one-third of babies exposed to antidepressants in the womb suffer temporary withdrawal symptoms like agitation. The F.D.A. has warned that one popular depression drug, Paxil, from GlaxoSmithKline, may increase the risk of rare heart problems in newborns exposed to the medication in utero.

"It's very important to get across that we don't know for certain that the drugs actually caused persistent pulmonary hypertension, and that if they did, the risk is still low, about one in a hundred," said the new study's lead author, Dr. Christine Chambers, an assistant professor of [pediatrics](#) at the University of California, San Diego, who worked with researchers from Boston University and Harvard. "But women should be informed."

Psychiatrists estimate that 10 percent to 15 percent of pregnant women suffer bouts of depression, and at least 1 in 10 of those take antidepressants.

Between 1998 and 2003, the research team interviewed 377 women who had recently given birth to a baby with persistent pulmonary hypertension, asking about medical history and drugs taken during pregnancy. The researchers found that 3.7 percent of the infants had been exposed to commonly prescribed antidepressants after the 20th week of pregnancy, about six times the rate among infants in a comparison group of healthy babies born at the same time.

The antidepressants belong to a class of drugs that acts in the brain to prolong the action of a mood-related messenger chemical called serotonin. They included Celexa, from Forest Laboratories; Zoloft, from Pfizer; Paxil; and Prozac, from Eli Lilly.

In their paper, the researchers argue that the drugs may hinder the body's production of agents that help blood vessels dilate. If the vessels in a newborn's lungs do not open properly, they cannot absorb sufficient oxygen, and the body may reflexively hold its breath, further starving itself of air, doctors say. Giving an infant oxygen, or nitric oxide, which helps open vessels, often relieves the problem. An estimated 10 percent to 20 percent of cases are severe enough that doctors may connect an affected child to an artificial lung.

Obstetricians, psychiatrists and pediatricians agree that pregnant women taking the drugs should consult their doctors to decide how to proceed. Stopping antidepressant therapy can cause withdrawal effects as well as relapse, they say.

Dr. Timothy Oberlander, a developmental pediatrician at the University of British Columbia, said that the new study added to a small but growing literature that was helping clarify the risks of specific drugs taken during pregnancy.

"You're talking about small numbers here, but it's clear that there are a group of babies that have more side-effects from exposure to these drugs than most," Dr. Oberlander said, "and women need to weigh this against the risk of untreated depression, which not only affects the mother but the context in which the child is raised."