

FERTILITY AND OVARIAN CANCER

A study published in January 1993 in the American Journal of Epidemiology (136:1184-1203) suggested a possible association between infertile women using drugs for ovulation induction and ovarian cancer. The study failed to specify, among other important information, the fertility drugs used by affected women. Nevertheless, it generated a lot of media attention and also raised concerns particularly among infertility patients with regard to the safety of the medications commonly prescribed by their physicians. The purpose of this communication is to clarify some of the points in the study that render it severely flawed in its design and conclusions.

First, the study based its conclusions on 13 patients with ovarian cancer, 12 who had taken fertility enhancing medications and 1 who had not. The 12 affected patients were the only patients with ovarian cancer who had taken these medications and who were ever reported to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Since physicians worldwide began using fertility enhancing medications 30 years ago more than 12 million prescriptions have been filled in the United States. In fact, a 1987 long time follow-up study in the same American Journal of Epidemiology (125:780-90) failed to show any association between the use of ovulation induction drugs and any long term effect, including ovarian cancer.

Second, although any suggestion of an increased risk of malignancy associated with fertility drugs warrants additional study, it is important to sort out the important facts from information that has the potential of being used as sensational stories in the media. There are many facts about ovarian cancer that are well known. Some of these facts do not support the association of ovulation inducing drugs with the cancer:

1. Ovarian cancer represents 4% of all female cancer. One in 424 women will develop ovarian cancer before the age of 40.
2. Oral contraceptive use for several years provides a 50% reduction in the risk of ovarian cancer.
3. Women without children are at higher risk for ovarian cancer compared to women who have had children.
4. Infertile women are at higher risk (double) for ovarian cancer unless they became pregnant.

Since this original study, several published reports have not identified an association between fertility drugs and ovarian cancer. These studies were much better designed and more powerful in their ability to examine any relationship between fertility drugs and ovarian cancer.

Given the available information, we are in agreement with the American Society of Reproductive Medicine assertion that the judicious use of medications for the purpose of ovulation induction in the face of infertility is indicated.

We encourage you to discuss this matter with your physician should you have any further questions.

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