Is metronidazole teratogenic? A meta-analysis

Tomás Caro-Patón,1 Alfonso Carvajal,1 Isaac Martín de Diego,1 Luis H. Martín-Arias,1
Ana Alvarez Requejo1 & Elvira Rodríguez Pinilla2

1Instituto de Farmacoepidemiología, Universidad de Valladolid, Valladolid and 2Spanish Collaborative Study of Congenital Malformations (ECEMC), Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain

Aim In order to assess whether the use of metronidazole during pregnancy is associated with a higher risk of congenital malformations, a meta-analysis was conducted.

Methods All epidemiological studies (cohort and case-control) which estimate risk of congenital malformations after exposure to metronidazole during early pregnancy were included in the meta-analysis. To obtain a summary odds ratio, the Mantel-Haenszel method was used. A test to verify absence of heterogeneity was also performed.

Results One unpublished case-control and four published cohort studies fulfilled the inclusion criteria and were not statistically heterogeneous. A summary odds ratio was calculated for metronidazole exposure during the first trimester: OR = 1.08, 95% CI: 0.90–1.29, heterogeneity test \( \chi^2 = 4.72, P = 0.32 \).

Conclusions This meta-analysis did not find any relationship between metronidazole exposure during the first trimester of pregnancy and birth defects.

Keywords: metronidazole, malformations, meta-analysis

Introduction

Metronidazole is an antibacterial and antiprotozoal agent used in Trichomonas infections, amoebiasis, giardiasis, bacterial vaginosis and anaerobic infections [1]. The drug is mutagenic in bacteria and carcinogenic in rodents. It crosses the placenta to the foetus and its use in pregnancy is controversial [2]. Metronidazole is classified, according to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) risk categories for drug use during pregnancy, as a B Risk Factor [3]: i.e. either animal reproduction studies have not demonstrated a foetal risk but there are no controlled studies in pregnant women, or animal reproduction studies have shown an adverse effect on the foetus that was not confirmed in controlled studies on women in the first trimester of pregnancy. The manufacturer and the Centers for Disease Control state that metronidazole should not be used during the first trimester. However, since no other therapy has been shown to produce an adequate response in the treatment of trichomoniasis, metronidazole can be used in pregnant women to treat such an infection during the second or third trimester [4].

Several epidemiological studies have found no risk of congenital malformations when using metronidazole during pregnancy [5–7], although another [8] found a twofold risk. In contrast, some case reports of foetal malformations have been described when the drug was used early in pregnancy [9–13]. Our centre has received a report concerning the case of a new-born child with suprarenal neuroblastoma whose mother had been taking oral and intravaginal metronidazole during the first trimester of pregnancy [14].

The wide use of metronidazole in the treatment of trichomonal or bacterial vaginosis, together with inconclusive data from the literature and the above mentioned report, led us to conduct a meta-analysis in order to clarify the safety of metronidazole use during the first trimester of pregnancy.

Methods

Study identification

A computerised Medline search combining the keywords ‘metronidazole’, ‘pregnancy’, ‘teratogenic’ and ‘malformation’ was performed from January 1966 to December 1996. Another search was carried out in the Iowa Drug Information Service (IDIS) from January 1985 to December 1996 for the drug metronidazole and the descriptor ‘side effect foetal effect’. A fully recursive search of reference lists of all reviewed articles and of retrieved primary studies was also performed to find references not identified in the computerised searches. An inquiry was made at the Spanish Collaborative Study of Congenital Malformations (ECEMC, Estudio Colaborativo Español de Malformaciones Congénitas), a member of the European Network of Teratology Information (ENTIS) [15], about data available in Spain on metronidazole exposure in pregnant women and foetal malformations.

Study selection

The inclusion criteria were observational epidemiological studies, whether cohort or case-control, assessing risk of any foetal malformation associated with metronidazole use.
whatever its indication during the first trimester of pregnancy. The epidemiological studies provided a group of women exposed to metronidazole during early pregnancy and another non-exposed group, with the numbers of malformations found in both groups.

**Statistical analysis**

This meta-analysis was conducted using the Mantel-Haenszel method [16] in order to combine information of multiple 2×2 tables. We calculated an odds ratio for each study and a summary odds ratio for all the studies, with 95% confidence intervals. The Breslow-Day test [17] was performed to verify absence of heterogeneity among the studies included in the meta-analysis.

**Results**

Of all the references dealing with risk of congenital malformations associated with metronidazole use during pregnancy from 1966 to 1996, only four fulfilled the inclusion criteria [5–8]. Table 1 shows the five epidemiological studies included in the meta-analysis: four published cohort studies that compared foetal malformations in pregnant women, exposed and unexposed to metronidazole, and one unpublished case-control study which also fulfilled the inclusion criteria. Risk ratios in these studies were variable and only one of them had a twofold risk, although this was not statistically significant [8].

Unpublished data collected by the ECEMC, concerning 11 133 796 live-births between April 1976 and December 1993, were also included. The design of the ECEMC is that of a case-control study including 21 078 new-borns with malformations identified within the first three days of life and 20 784 healthy new-borns in the control group. A control is defined as the next new-born to a malformed child, with the same sex and born in the same hospital. Maternal drug use was assessed by the attendant doctor during an interview with the mothers carried out within the first 3 days of delivery [18, 19]. The odds ratio calculated was 1.48 (95% confidence interval, 0.78–2.79) for exposure to metronidazole during the first trimester.

In several studies [11–13, 20–23] birth defects associated with metronidazole exposure during pregnancy were described; since all of them were case-series lacking a control group, they were excluded from the meta-analysis (Table 2).

Table 3 shows the studies included in the meta-analysis with the newly calculated individual odds ratio and their confidence intervals. The heterogeneity test was not significant, allowing these studies to be pooled, the summary odds ratio being 1.08 (95% CI: 0.90–1.29). When excluding the case-control study, the results did not differ from those obtained previously (summary odds ratio = 1.05; 95% CI: 0.87–1.27; heterogeneity test: $X^2 = 3.74, P = 0.29$).

**Discussion**

There are several ways in which a clinician can obtain information about drug safety during pregnancy [24]: firstly, from individual case reports and case series in the published literature, or from those coming from adverse drug reaction monitoring systems. There are some case reports of holotelecephaly, clefts in the hard and soft palate and optic atrophy in infants whose mother had been taking metronidazole in the first trimester of pregnancy [9, 10]. Some case series have also collected different malformations. In two of them, including 151 and 55 pregnant women exposed to metronidazole during the first trimester, three and four infants born with malformations, respectively, were identified [11, 12]. In another series, comprising 23 similarly exposed pregnant women [13], three pregnancies ended in spontaneous abortion and five were associated with congenital abnormalities: two with hydrocele, one with congenital dislocation of the hip (in a female twin), another with unilateral metatarsus varus and the other with mental retardation (both parents being mentally retarded). Nevertheless, no specific malformation appeared in the different cases and, although they can warn us about the possibility of a causal relationship, this cannot be established on these premises.

Secondly, epidemiological studies constitute a better approach to the problem, but samples are often too small to acquire enough statistical power. One out of all the studies included in the meta-analysis had an odds ratio below 1, the rest having a higher value, but no risk can be established from this data since all of them included 1 in their confidence interval.

The meta-analytical method provides a quantitative approach in order to establish a more reliable estimate of the risk of metronidazole use in pregnant women. In this meta-analysis, data from a sample of more than 200 000 individuals could be pooled, and no relationship was found between birth defects and metronidazole exposure during the first trimester of pregnancy. The studies included in this meta-analysis were all cohort or case-control in design, but there are some differences between them that should be emphasised: All the control groups consisted of healthy women except one study [5] in which the reference group was made up of pregnant women with non-treated trichomoniasis. In fact the present meta-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Design</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Malformations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heimonen et al. [8]</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Cohort prospective</td>
<td>50/282</td>
<td>Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa et al. [6]</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>Cohort retrospective</td>
<td>104/30</td>
<td>Any</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piper et al. [7]</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Cohort retrospective</td>
<td>24/18</td>
<td>Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECEMC*</td>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Case-control</td>
<td>4186</td>
<td>Any</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=$\text{number of pregnant women included in each study}\$ *Spanish Collaborative Study of Congenital Malformations [18].

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Table 2: Studies excluded from meta-analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Birth defects</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Association</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scott-Gray [20]</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robinson &amp; Mirchandani [21]</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodin &amp; Hass [22]</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sands et al. [23]</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peterson et al. [12]</td>
<td>1966</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beard et al. [13]</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aselton et al. [11]</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n = number of women exposed to metronidazole during the first trimester. Association according to the author’s criteria. Figure obtained from graphical data.

Table 3: Studies included in the meta-analysis and odds ratio of malformations associated with metronidazole exposure during the first trimester.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Cases of malformations</th>
<th>Odds Ratio</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heinonen et al. 1977 [8]</td>
<td>4/31</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.75–6.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan 1979 [5]</td>
<td>2/63</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>0.23–5.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa et al. 1997 [6]</td>
<td>63/1083</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.71–1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piper et al. 1993 [7]</td>
<td>96/1307</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>0.90–1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECEMC (1994)</td>
<td>24/40</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>0.78–2.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary Odds Ratio</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>0.90–1.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References

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