

Health Briefs

by MARIANN MEISTER FISHBEIN
News Writer

Inositol reduces risks for premature infants

HELSINKI, FINLAND -- Inositol, a sugar alcohol found in breast milk, significantly reduces the risk of lung and eye damage in premature infants, a recent study shows.

Inositol supplementation during the early neonatal period decreases the likelihood of severe, chronic injury of the retina and the lung in premature infants with respiratory distress syndrome, according to the study. Researchers recommend that during the first week of life of premature infants, parenteral nutrition and enteral feeding should be supplemented with inositol so that the inositol equals that from breast milk.

The researchers divided 221 infants born at six to seven months into two separate groups. One group received the amount of inositol found in breast milk. The other received a placebo of standard nutrition.

Among the infants who received inositol, 6 percent died of respiratory problems, compared with 16 percent in the placebo group. Seventy-one percent of the infants who received inositol survived their first month without bronchopulmonary dysplasia, compared with 55 percent in the placebo group. Thirteen percent sustained retinopathy of prematurity, compared with 26 percent in the placebo group.

The study was published in the May 7 New England Journal of Medicine. It was directed by Mikko Hallman, M.D., of the University of Helsinki, Finland.

Cost sharing and its effectiveness

NEW YORK -- A study sponsored by the Agency for Health Care Policy and Research questions the effectiveness of "cost sharing" -- the practice of requiring insured patients to share the costs of their medical visits.

According to the study, the introduction of cost sharing to some patients in a practice increases the treatment costs to other patients whose plans don't require cost sharing.

When the economic effects of cost sharing are analyzed for all patients within a physician's practice, the results are different than if researchers look



Memorial Hospital Medical Center, Long Beach, Calif.

A study published in the New England Journal of Medicine found that sugar alcohol in breast milk can reduce lung damage risks in infants.

at only the expense incurred among patients who cost share, according to study investigator Marianne Fahs, Ph.D., of Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

In three years, investigators studied data gathered from medical records and billing files from a large multispecialty group practice for patients insured under the United Mine Workers of America Health and Retirement Fund (UMWA). During the study, UMWA's insurer introduced cost sharing. The researchers also studied patients covered by United Steelworkers' health benefits plans.

Average monthly visits by UMWA beneficiaries decreased by one quarter after the introduction of cost sharing, because of a price increase. Although the cost to UMWA's health fund for each episode of treatment declined after the adaptation of cost sharing, it increased for other patients at the group practice. According to Fahs, the price increase for the steelworkers was a result of changes initiated by the group practice's management, higher ambulatory care fees, longer hospital stays and increased physician fees for inpatient services.

Other findings showed that following the introduction of cost sharing, physicians at the group practice began recommending longer intervals between followup visits for UMWA beneficiaries, but shorter intervals for other patients.

The study was published in the April 1992 Health Services Research.

U.S. spends less on preventive care

WASHINGTON-- Preventing chronic disease and illness ranks low in U.S. health care spending, according to a study published in the Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) July 24, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

Approximately 3 percent, or \$18.4 billion of health care expenditures in the United States was allocated to prevention in 1988, according to the federal researchers. The small percentage was subtracted from the nation's \$540 billion health care tab in that year.

Researchers made the analysis from the Health Care Financing Administration's figures on medical goods and services spending -- or the \$18.4 billion U.S. health care dollars HCFA says was spent on direct preventive medical services.

CDC investigators also reviewed all prevention funding sources including: federal, state and local government programs; voluntary health associations; corporations and foundations; worksite programs; and personal prevention services.

In their analysis of these resources, CDC researchers estimate that in 1988, the total spending on prevention in the United States was \$32.8 billion, or 0.7 percent of the gross national product. Of the total prevention related spending in 1988, 35 percent (\$11.6 billion) was spent on preventive health services, 30 percent (\$9.8 billion) on health protection and 24 percent (\$7.8 billion) on health promotion.

Hot tubs and birth defects

BOSTON-- Women who use hot tubs or saunas during the first trimester of their pregnancies face up to triple the risk of bearing children with spina bifida or brain damage, according to a recent study published in the Aug. 19 Journal of the American Medical Association

Researchers collected data from of study of 22,762 women. The use of hot tubs increased the likelihood of fetuses developing neural tube defects. Women who reported using a hot tub during the first two months of pregnancy were 2.8 times more likely to have an infant with a defect than women with no heat exposure.

Sauna use or a fever of greater than 100 degrees also increased the risk, by a factor of 1.8, according to the study results. Exposure to multiple heat sources led to an even greater risk, according to the study.

Of the women surveyed, a total of 5,566 were exposed to at least one heat source. Of the 1,254 who were exposed to hot tub use in early pregnancy, seven had babies with neural tube defects. A total of 49 pregnancies ended with a neural tube defect; including 23 cases of spina bifida alone.

The study was conducted by the Center for Human Genetics at Boston University's School of Medicine.

Jewish custom linked to urinary tract infection

PETACH TIKVA, ISRAEL--- Traditional Jewish circumcision in Israeli male infants is associated with an increased risk of neonatal urinary tract infections, according to a recently published study.

In Israel, Jewish males are traditionally circumcised on the eighth day of life. Researchers found that this custom may predispose newborn males to urinary tract infections during the 12-day period following circumcision.

In the 56 males studied, 48 percent of the episodes of urinary tract infections appeared during the twelve days following circumcision -- with the increased incidence during this period highly significant, according to the study.

All of the male infants included in the study were Jewish and circumcised traditionally on the eighth day of life by a mohel (ritual practitioner who performs the custom). The ritual involves stretching the prepuce over the glans, pulling it through a slit in a shield and cutting it with a knife. The bleeding surface is then covered with gauze which is tightly wrapped around the penis.

Researchers pointed out that neonatal circumcision in the U.S. has not been associated with an increased frequency of urinary tract infections. In fact, it has been shown to reduce the frequency of infection later in life, the researchers said.

In the United States, most male infants are circumcised shortly after birth, using a Gomco clamp or plastibell device.

The study was published in the June 1992 Clinical Pediatrics.

A 1989 Report of the AAP Task Force on Circumcision finds that while there is some evidence that circumcision might prevent some infections, the decision whether to circumcise an infant is best left to parents and their pediatrician.

Editor's note: Health Briefs summarizes journal and magazine articles, news reports, child health statistics and new resources of interest to pediatricians and parents. To submit a Health Brief, contact: Mariann Meister Fishbein, News Writer, AAP News, American Academy of Pediatrics, 141 Northwest Point Blvd., P.O. Box 927, Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0927; (800) 433-9016, ext. 6791.

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