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Ob-gyns call for BV screening

Bacterial vaginosis link to early labor is confirmed

BY DENISE MANN

A large, new study has confirmed that bacterial vaginosis can trigger preterm labor, and ob-gyns are calling for careful screening to reduce perinatal morbidity and mortality.

In the study of more than 10,000 pregnant women, those with bacterial vaginosis diagnosed during the second trimester of pregnancy were 40% more likely to give birth to a premature, low birth weight baby than women who did not have the infection, according to lead author Sharon L. Hillier, Ph.D., of the University of Washington in Seattle.

"A lot of obstetricians and gynecologists are still skeptical that

such a common infection can be a problem," said Dr. Hillier. "I am hoping this study will increase awareness of bacterial vaginosis as a potentially really important problem for pregnant women."

Dr. Hillier and a multi-center team including researchers from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases reported the results in *The New England Journal of Medicine* (1995;333:1737-1741).

Another report in the same issue of the journal (1995;33:1732-1735) concluded that treatment with metronidazole and erythromycin reduced the rate of premature delivery in women with bacterial vaginosis who were at increased risk for preterm birth.

"These developments are the most exciting story in obstetrics and gynecology today," said Robert Goldenberg, M.D., the chairman of ob-gyn at the Univer-

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GARY BEISSON/ZUMA

Physicians should screen both high-risk and low-risk pregnant women, says Dr. David Eschenbach of the University of Washington in Seattle.

BV link to preterm labor confirmed, screening urged

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University of Alabama at Birmingham, and an author of the second study.

Approximately 12% to 22% of all pregnant women have bacterial vaginosis, according to the Seattle researchers.

The infection is responsible for about 6% of premature deliveries, and thus is a major cause of infant mortality, they added.

In the first study, researchers tested 10,397 pregnant women for bacterial vaginosis during their second trimester of pregnancy. They found bacterial vaginosis in 16% of the women. About 5% of these women gave birth to infants who weighed less than 4 pounds, 10 ounces, and were delivered before the 37th week of pregnancy.

After taking into account other risk factors for early delivery—including a previous preterm birth, being an African-American, poor diet and recurring sexually transmitted diseases—statistical analysis showed a 40% increased risk of preterm labor in the infected women.

"Obstetricians need to start being aware that they potentially need to screen and treat all patients with bacterial vaginosis regardless of if they are in high- or low-risk groups," said study author David Eschenbach, M.D., of the University of Washington in Seattle.

"It may be time to start thinking about screening for bacterial vaginosis in all pregnant women," agreed John Botti, M.D., of the

Hershey Medical center in Hershey, Pa.

"We do universal screening for syphilis and other conditions," Dr. Hillier noted. "Universal screening can be just as easily done for bacterial vaginosis."

In the Alabama study, 26% of 426 women with bacterial vaginosis taking erythromycin and metronidazole delivered prematurely, compared with 36% of the 190 infected women assigned to placebo. -

In an editorial accompanying the Seattle study, Maureen Hack, M.B., Ch.B., of the University Hospitals of Cleveland, and Irwin R. Merkatz, M.D., of the Montefiore Medical Center in New York City emphasized that certain questions about low birth weight still remain unanswered, despite the confirmation of bacterial vaginosis as a factor, and the efficacy of antibiotic treatment.

"Why do women with bacterial vaginosis who receive antibiotic treatment still have poor birth outcomes? Why are women with bacterial vaginosis more likely to be unmarried, black and poor?" the two researchers asked.

The problem of preterm birth is a complex one, and studies are badly needed to clarify its causes, they concluded.

Investigators must make an effort not to let the current belt-tightening climate in Washington impede that important work, the researchers said.