

■ Bronchodilators make wheezy infants worse

The March 2003 issue of Archives of Diseases of Childhood reports that bronchodilators, drugs used to open constricted airways, actually reduce lung function if they are used in infants who have recurrent wheeze but don't have asthma.

According to lead researcher Dr. Ward Hofhuis of the University Medical Centre in Rotterdam, "Approximately 60% of wheezy infants and toddlers do not have asthma, but [transitory] conditions associated with diminished airway function." He goes on to say, "Bronchodilators are widely used for this category of patients despite conflicting data on their effectiveness in this age group."

His research team analyzed data on the lung function of 27 infants with restricted airways before and after they inhaled bronchodilating drugs known as beta2-agonists.

"In spite of what one might expect, we found a reduction in lung function after beta2-agonist treatment in wheezy infants," Hofhuis said. "Moreover, beta2-agonists increase metabolism and heart rate and may cause [problems which lead to reduced oxygen in the blood]."

The reports concludes "the treatment should be critically evaluated, and adverse effects recognized."

■ Asthma Inhalers May Cause Breathing Problems

Research presented at the March 23, 2004 annual meeting of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology in San Francisco, California finds that a previously-thought inactive ingredient in some asthma inhalers can produce constriction and tightening of the lung's bronchial tubes, which is what the inhalers are designed to relieve.

The inhalers in question contain the drug Albuterol which isn't a single chemical but is the result of two components working together, an S-isomer and an R-isomer. It was previously thought that the R-isomer was the only active component and the S-isomer was inactive.

According to the report, separate testing on the two components now reveals that the S-isomer "has significant activity and actually mimics...asthma."

While acknowledging that the study is a preliminary one, the report concludes that "we need to give some further consideration to the fact that these S-isomers may not be in fact inert but may be producing responses, many of which are unknown but some of which may be counterproductive."

■ Drug Company Misled FDA, Doctors And Patients About Safety Of Asthma Drug

The health care consumer group Public Citizen published a letter in the October 7, 2005 issue of the British medical journal the Lancet that reports drug maker GlaxoSmithKline misled the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) by presenting study results showing the popular asthma drug salmeterol was safer than it actually is. The drug is sold under the brand names Serevent and Advair.

In 1996, a 28 week study involving tens of thousands of asthma patients taking either salmeterol or a placebo was begun. That study showed that patients taking the drug salmeterol ran a higher risk of death than the placebo patients but the results of that study were never published. In August 2003, the drug company submitted final study data that included the six months after the study, after the patients quit taking the drug.

By including this post-study information, the apparent dangers of salmeterol were reduced in four critical study outcomes, including asthma-related death.

Upon learning of the suspicious reporting, the FDA has recommended strengthening the warning on the labels of Serevent and Advair but has yet to actually require it.

Epidemiologist Dr. Peter Lurie, deputy director of Public Citizen's Health Research Group says, "the behavior of GlaxoSmithKline in submitting these faulty data is deplorable. Absent greater transparency at the FDA, we will never know how often this kind of self-serving data analysis occurs."

Public Citizen has listed Serevent as a "Do Not Use" drug on their website at www.worstpills.org.

Together, Serevent and Advair were dispensed more than 16.3 million times in U.S. Pharmacies in 2004.