Pregnancy Does Not Increase Risk of Hodgkin Lymphoma Relapse

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ASCO Perspective
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“*This is welcome and reassuring news for women who are in remission from Hodgkin lymphoma and wish to become pregnant. This study is also a reminder that fertility after cancer remains an important concern for many patients, and it’s a topic that should be discussed more frequently between physicians and their patients.*”

Women who become pregnant while in remission from Hodgkin lymphoma are not at increased risk for cancer relapse, according to a Swedish study published on December 14 in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology*.

According to the authors, this is the first large study to specifically examine pregnancy as a potential trigger of relapse in Hodgkin lymphoma survivors. The findings are consistent with the findings of previous small studies.

Researchers analyzed data from Swedish health care registries and medical records on 449 women, ages 18-40, diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma from 1992 to 2009. A pregnancy-associated relapse was defined as a relapse occurring during pregnancy or within five years of giving birth. Women were followed starting at six months after Hodgkin lymphoma diagnosis.

Among the 449 women, 144 became pregnant during the follow-up period but only one of those women experienced a relapse within five years of pregnancy. Of the remaining women who did not become pregnant, 46 had a relapse. In fact, women with a recent pregnancy had a lower relapse rate than those who did not have a recent pregnancy, although this difference was not statistically significant.

*“Based on these findings, we see no evidence that Hodgkin lymphoma survivors who become...”*
pregnant are at higher risk for relapse,” said lead study author Caroline Weibull, MSc, a biostatistician and doctoral student in the Department of Medical Epidemiology and Biostatistics at Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, Sweden.

Hodgkin lymphoma is the most common cancer in adolescents and young adults, and many Hodgkin lymphoma survivors are women of childbearing age. It has a relatively high survival rate, particularly in females below the age of 45.

“We conducted this study because Hodgkin lymphoma survivors, as well as clinicians, have expressed worries that pregnancy may increase the risk of relapse, despite a lack of empirical evidence to support such concerns,” said co-author Ingrid Glimelius, MD, PhD, an oncologist at Akademiska Hospital in Uppsala, Sweden and a researcher affiliated with Uppsala University’s Department of Immunology, Genetics and Pathology and Karolinska Institutet’s Department of Medicine. “This rigorous study should help put those fears to rest.”

One possible explanation for the lack of relapses in women who gave birth during follow-up is a selection bias known as the “healthy mother effect,” which postulates that women with less severe disease are more likely to become pregnant and at the same time are at lower risk for relapse.

“We saw no evidence of a ‘healthy mother effect’ in our study,” said Caroline Weibull. “After accounting for differences in age and disease severity, we found that the probability of becoming pregnant did not differ markedly between patients with advanced and early stage disease or between patients who had different types of chemotherapy.”

The study was supported by the Swedish Cancer Society, the Strategic Research Program in Epidemiology at Karolinska Institutet, the Swedish Society of Medicine and the Swedish Society for Medical Research.

Helpful Links from Cancer.Net, ASCO’s cancer information website:

- Guide to Hodgkin Lymphoma
- Having a Baby After Cancer: Pregnancy
- Understanding Cancer Risk

The Journal of Clinical Oncology is the tri-monthly peer-reviewed journal of the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO), the world’s leading professional society representing physicians who treat people with cancer.

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