INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS

Obstetric cholestasis

Introduction
This leaflet is designed to give basic information about a condition called obstetric cholestasis, - an uncommon complication of pregnancy which causes a build-up of bile acids in the bloodstream.

What is obstetric cholestasis?
Obstetric cholestasis is a condition of the liver which occurs in some pregnant women. Cholestasis means there is a reduced flow of bile down the bile ducts in the liver. Some bile, particularly salts, then leak out into the bloodstream. These circulate in the bloodstream and can cause symptoms. Obstetric cholestasis is sometimes called intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy. The main symptom of obstetric cholestasis is a persistent itch. This will go when you have the baby.

There is possibly a small increased risk of complications of pregnancy, but the evidence for this is not conclusive. More research is currently under way into the risks and effects of the condition and treatment.

What are the symptoms of obstetric cholestasis?
Typically, symptoms occur in the last third of pregnancy when the hormone levels are at their highest. But, it sometimes develops earlier in pregnancy.

Itch
This is the most common and typical symptom. The itch can be all over, but it is often worst on the hands and feet. It can be more troublesome when you are hot at night. Commonly, itching is the only symptom. It tends to worsen until you have the baby.

Other less common symptoms include:
- tiredness
- poor appetite and feeling sick
- mild jaundice. You may go yellow and have dark urine and pale faeces (stools).

What causes obstetric cholestasis?
The exact cause is not clear. Whatever the underlying cause, pregnancy triggers the problem. Within a week or so after giving birth the symptoms usually clear and there is no long-term problem with the liver.
Is obstetric cholestasis serious?
The symptoms can be unpleasant for the mother, particularly the itch. If there is a risk, it is thought to be small, but the concerns are as follows:

For the unborn baby
Until recently it had been thought that obstetric cholestasis caused a small increased risk of stillbirth. The risk of stillbirth in a normal pregnancy in the UK is about 5 per 1000 births. The risk if you have obstetric cholestasis is thought to be a little more than this. However, this has recently been challenged.

More research is currently under way into the risks and effects of the condition and treatment. It is advised that if you have obstetric cholestasis you should consult your care providers.

For the mother
There is possibly an increased risk of serious bleeding from the womb just after giving birth. But the studies are not conclusive and there may be no increased risk of this.

How is obstetric cholestasis diagnosed?
The diagnosis is suspected if you develop itching during pregnancy. A blood test can detect the raised level of bile acids and liver enzymes (chemicals) in the blood.

The diagnosis is confirmed if you have:
- Itching which is not due to any other known cause (such as a skin disorder), and
- High levels of liver enzymes and/or bile salts in your blood which cannot be explained by any other liver disease.

Both the itch and high level of liver enzymes and bile salts go away after the birth of the baby. A blood test done some time after the baby is born can confirm this. This sometimes helps to confirm the diagnosis was, in fact, obstetric cholestasis if there had been any doubt.

What is the treatment for obstetric cholestasis?
There is no cure for obstetric cholestasis. As mentioned, the condition is not usually serious but can be distressing. A personal plan of care will be discussed with you by the medical team including how to manage your symptoms and regular check-ups to monitor the progress of you and your baby.

You can help to manage your symptoms by avoiding alcohol, taking cool baths, wearing loose fitting clothing and ensuring plenty of rest.

Contact details
If you require any further information please contact your midwife or Pregnancy Day Care Monday - Friday 9am-5pm 01623 622515 on extension 3071

Further sources of information
www.patient.co.uk/health/obstetric-cholestasis.html

www.ocsupport.org.uk

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk
External websites may be referred to in specific cases. Any external websites are provided for your information and convenience. We cannot accept responsibility for the information found on them. Stating a web address does not imply we endorse a particular site. Neither does not stating a web address imply lack of endorsement.

**Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)**

The PALS team is available to help with any of your comments, compliments or concerns and will ensure a prompt and efficient service. Contact details:

- King’s Mill Hospital  **01623 672222** (out of hours answer phone)  
  Email: Pals.kmh@sfh-tr.nhs.uk

- Newark Hospital  **01636 685692** (out of hours answer phone)  
  Email: Pals.nwk@sfh-tr.nhs.uk

If you need this information in a different language or format, please contact PALS, as above.

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