Pregnancy, antidepressant use and autism

In the middle of December 2015, news outlets reported on a new study showing that mothers taking selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors were more likely to give birth to autistic children (1). This study was consistent with earlier ones that suggested a similar relationship (2,3). The strength of the associations is still being debated and this will likely continue as more studies are done.

From my perspective, the bigger issue is how we as chiropractors can help women to avoid depression and the associated use of SSRIs and thus, eliminate a potential risk factor for autism. To do this, we must understand the biochemical nature of depression, which typically gets confusing because we mostly view it from the perspective of how medications work. SSRIs target serotonin receptors, so the global view of depression is that it is a problem with serotonin metabolism. And since SSRIs inhibit serotonin reuptake, the implication is that depressed people do not make enough serotonin. The supplement industry has taken their lead from this information and produces supplements to help increase serotonin levels, such as 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP), which functions as a precursor for serotonin synthesis. I take a different view of depression because the available evidence does not suggest that people are unable to make adequate serotonin.

Since chronic inflammation is the basis for most conditions, it is important to look for an inflammatory answer to a question about a health problem. When it comes to depression, we now know conclusively that chronic inflammation is a promoter (4,5). We also know that inflammatory cytokines increase the breakdown of serotonin (5), which means our impression should not be that depressed people are unable to make enough serotonin. In summary, the problem with depression is that a chronic inflammatory state is associated with a loss of normal serotonin levels and speaks directly to helping patients reduce chronic inflammation. The remainder of this article will discuss treatment options available to chiropractors that help to reduce chronic inflammation and depression.

Most chiropractors encourage their patients to exercise more, and interestingly, it is known that exercise helps to reduce chronic inflammation (6). Studies have shown that exercise can be as effective as Zoloft in reduce depressive symptoms (7). We also know that there is a hedonic or well being effect that is promoted by exercise (8). Exercise intensity should be gauged based on a patient’s level of fitness and tolerance. Many women exercise throughout their pregnancy.

A pro-inflammatory diet is known to promote chronic inflammation and depression (9,10). Thus, we should urge out patients to “deflame” their diets by eating anti-inflammatory foods.

Several basic supplements have also been shown to help reduce depression, including a multivitamin, magnesium, fish oil and vitamin D (11-14). All of these supplements have a mild anti-inflammatory effect.
Spinal manipulation may help reduce depressive symptoms. A case history demonstrated that depression was resolved in a 71-year old female with low back pain. The authors conclude that this outcome may have been due to a variety of factors, such as natural progression, therapeutic effect of touch, patient–doctor interaction, or improvement secondary to the improvement of her back pain (15).

References


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