Ursodeoxycholic acid to reduce adverse perinatal outcomes for intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy: the PITCHES RCT

Lucy C Chappell,1* Jennifer L Bell,2 Anne Smith,2 Catherine Rounding,2 Ursula Bowler,2 Louise Linsell,2 Edmund Juszczak,2 Sue Tohill,1 Amanda Redford,3 Peter H Dixon,1 Jenny Chambers,4 Rachael Hunter,5 Jon Dorling,6 Catherine Williamson1† and Jim G Thornton3†

1Department of Women and Children's Health, School of Life Course Sciences, King's College London, London, UK
2National Perinatal Epidemiology Unit Clinical Trials Unit, Nuffield Department of Population Health, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK
3Division of Child Health, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK
4ICP Support, Sutton Coldfield, UK
5Research Department of Primary Care and Population Health, University College London, London, UK
6Division of Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine, IWK Health Centre, Halifax, NS, Canada

*Corresponding author lucy.chappell@kcl.ac.uk
†Joint senior authors

Declared competing interests of authors: Lucy C Chappell reports that she is chairperson of the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) Health Technology Assessment (HTA) Clinical Evaluation and Trials Committee (January 2019 to present), a member of the NIHR Efficacy and Mechanism Evaluation (EME) Strategic Advisory Committee (from November 2019 to present) and is funded by a NIHR Professorship (award number RP-2014-5-019). Jon Dorling reports that he was funded by Nutrinia Ltd. (Ramat Gan, Israel) in 2017 and 2018 for part of his salary to work as an expert advisor on a trial of enteral insulin. Jim G Thornton reports that he is a co-author of the Cochrane review of treatment for obstetric cholestasis, a co-author of a previous trial of ursodeoxycholic acid to treat intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy and that he is a member of the NIHR HTA and EME Editorial Board.

Published December 2020
DOI: 10.3310/eme07090
Plain English summary

The PITCHES RCT
Efficacy and Mechanism Evaluation 2020; Vol. 7: No. 9
DOI: 10.3310/eme07090

NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk
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Why did we do this trial?

Intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy is the commonest pregnancy-specific liver disorder in the UK. It affects around 5500 women per year, causing troublesome itching, raised maternal bile acid concentrations, premature birth and, in extreme cases, stillbirth.

The most popular current drug used to treat intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy is called ursodeoxycholic acid (commonly known as 'urso'), but it has not been tested in any large clinical trials to show whether or not it prevents premature birth and stillbirth. Our trial asked: 'If a woman has intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy, what are the effects on the baby if she is treated with ursodeoxycholic acid (or placebo)?'.

What did we do?

Between December 2015 and September 2018, we recruited 605 women with intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy. Half of the women received ursodeoxycholic acid and half received a placebo (a ‘dummy’ tablet containing no active ingredients). This is the most reliable way to test a drug.

During the trial we also:

- collected blood test results
- measured the women’s itching level
- recorded birth information
- collected blood samples from some women to use for future research.

What did we find?

We found that ursodeoxycholic acid is not a drug that helps women with intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy. It did not reduce stillbirths or the chances of a baby needing to be admitted to a neonatal unit. It did not show any meaningful improvement in itching level for most women, nor did it reduce the woman’s bile acid levels.

What does this mean for women with intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy?

It means that most women do not need to take ursodeoxycholic acid because it will not help their itching or protect their baby from stillbirth. Further research is needed to identify whether there is a group of women who may still benefit from taking ursodeoxycholic acid, or whether other drugs could reduce the itching in women with intrahepatic cholestasis of pregnancy and prevent premature delivery and stillbirth.
Efficacy and Mechanism Evaluation

ISSN 2050-4365 (Print)
ISSN 2050-4373 (Online)

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Editorial contact: journals.library@nihr.ac.uk

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The EME programme is funded by the Medical Research Council (MRC) and the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR), with contributions from the Chief Scientist Office (CSO) in Scotland and National Institute for Social Care and Health Research (NISCHR) in Wales and the Health and Social Care Research and Development (HSC R&D), Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland.

This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the EME programme as project number 12/164/16. The contractual start date was in March 2015. The final report began editorial review in May 2019 and was accepted for publication in March 2020. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The EME editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

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