

A Consensus Statement on the Use of Domperidone To Support Lactation

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Introduction

Domperidone is a peripheral dopamine antagonist classically used to treat gastro-esophageal reflux and upper gastro-intestinal motility disorders. It is also used to prevent side effects associated with the treatment of Parkinson's Disease. It has been used in Canada since the mid-1980s, both in children and adults.

Domperidone also increases prolactin levels in the blood and has been used with success to increase milk supply in women with insufficient milk production¹. It does this by blocking the D2 and D3 dopamine receptors in the pituitary gland. As a result, prolactin, the secretion of which is blocked by dopamine, now is liberated from the anterior pituitary and stimulates the milk producing cells of the breast.

It is thought that, under certain conditions, domperidone may increase the QT interval on ECG, thereby increasing the risk of Torsade de Pointes or other life-threatening arrhythmias². In fact, there are many prescribed drugs which may increase the QT interval without seemingly increasing the risk of life-threatening arrhythmias. These include salbutamol, amitriptyline (and other tricyclic antidepressants), ciprofloxacin (and other fluoroquinolones), citalopram (and other SSRI's), clarithromycin (and other macrolides), diphenhydramine, and many other commonly used medications approved in Canada³.

Currently, little is known regarding specific contraindications for domperidone when used as a galactagogue. However, until further studies are conducted, it is recommended not to prescribe domperidone to any mother with a history of known or suspected cardiac arrhythmias (tachyarrhythmia, QT prolongation); currently on an anti-arrhythmic medication; or having a chronic/debilitating illness, abnormal liver function, or serious gastric abnormality⁴. Caution should also be used in mothers concomitantly taking medications known to alter the metabolism of domperidone (via inhibiting the cytochrome P450 pathway), medications that have dopaminergic or antidopaminergic activity, and medications which may increase the QT interval⁵.

Domperidone has previously been implicated as causal in arrhythmias when given intravenously in doses higher than would ever be used orally⁶. A warning advising against the use of domperidone by the Federal Drug Administration in the United States was published in 2004 based on the concern raised by high-dose intravenous administration of domperidone⁷. Of note, among the patients referenced in this warning, the majority had co-morbid serious illnesses, were receiving chemotherapy, and/or were severely hypokalemic⁸. Nonetheless, despite compelling arguments in opposition⁸, domperidone was consequently withdrawn from the U.S. market. In September, 2011, The FDA granted orphan drug status to domperidone for "treatment of hypoprolactinemia in breastfeeding mothers". This may represent the first step towards domperidone returning to the US market as an FDA-approved medication specifically for lactation support.

Most studies on adverse effects of domperidone have looked at doses of 30 to 60 mg/day. These studies describe the following most commonly reported adverse effects: dry mouth, transient skin rash or itching, headache, thirst, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, drowsiness, and nervousness⁹.

In March 2012, Health Canada endorsed an advisory statement, published by Teva Canada Limited, indicating that health practitioners should exercise caution when prescribing domperidone at doses greater than 30 mg/day¹⁰. The advice is based on the theoretical risk that higher oral doses of domperidone can trigger ventricular arrhythmias and sudden cardiac death. As detailed in the Critique section below, the justification for this advisory, especially in young breastfeeding women, is not supported by the scientific literature. Of primary concern is the likelihood that, based on the warning, many health practitioners will discontinue prescribing domperidone to mothers who would otherwise require it to support and sustain breastfeeding. As a consequence, numerous babies who would have otherwise breastfed will not. The adverse consequence of not breastfeeding along with the resultant introduction of artificial nutrition in infancy, carry serious associated morbidity and mortality for which there is scientifically solid, prolific, and compelling evidence¹¹⁻³⁴.

Most studies on domperidone for lactation use a starting dose of 30 mg/day. No studies to date have looked at safety and efficacy of dosage titration up to a maximum dose. Amongst lactation specialists in Canada, domperidone is being prescribed in doses ranging from a starting dose of 30-90 mg/day to a maximum dose of

80-160 mg/day. Of the thousands of mothers the authors of this statement have collectively treated with domperidone for the purposes of breastfeeding support, no one is aware of a single case of maternal death from ventricular arrhythmia. In fact, Health Canada's Canada Vigilance Program has confirmed that between 1965 and 2011, there were no cardiac-related deaths reported among women taking Domperidone³⁵.

Critique

The recent Health Canada-endorsed warning published in March 2012¹⁰ about the use of domperidone was based on data derived from two public health databases: one in the Netherlands³⁶ and one in Saskatchewan³⁷. The warning was based on information gathered from an entirely different population than those who would be taking domperidone for breastfeeding purposes and is thus not generalizable to the lactating population. The average age of the patients in the studies was 72.5 years in one³⁶ and 79.4 years in the other³⁷. Many of the patients in the studies had pre-existing health problems such as high blood pressure, coronary artery disease, and congestive heart failure.

There were, however, some notable trends that, when extrapolated to the breastfeeding population largely comprised of younger healthier women, are quite reassuring. In one study³⁷, the authors concluded that the risk of a cardiac problem related to taking domperidone in younger patients was much lower than in older patients. In fact, the risk quoted in younger patients was almost the same as that outcome occurring by chance alone (OR of 1.1 in those younger than age 60 compared with an OR of 1.64 in those older than age 60). That study also specifies that the risk in females was significantly lower than in males (OR of 1.25 in females compared with an OR of 2.23 in males).

The warning regarding the use of domperidone in higher doses (>30mg per day) was based on only one of the two studies³⁶; the other study¹⁵ did not include any information about dosing. In the one study where dosing information was included, out of the 1304 deaths that were studied, only 10 patients were taking domperidone at the time of death. Of those 10 taking domperidone, only 4 patients were documented to be taking higher doses of domperidone (>30mg per day). Thus, this Health Canada-endorsed dose-related warning comes from dosing data compiled from a total of four patients. In fact, the authors were not specifically cautioning physicians not to prescribe higher doses, but rather were suggesting that "it is important to avoid prescribing domperidone to patients with a high risk of sudden cardiac death". It is very hard to make a case for a drastic reduction in domperidone dosing in lactating women (wherein a dose of <30mg may not be sufficient to support lactation in a significant number of cases) when the data relied upon to generate the dosing warning was based on such a small number of cases that do not demographically resemble the population in which it is being prescribed.

Domperidone is generally used to treat gastro-intestinal problems, such as acid reflux. Some of the symptoms of heart disease may mimic symptoms of a gastro-intestinal illness. It is possible that some patients were taking domperidone for what was thought to be a gastro-intestinal problem when, in fact, the symptoms may have been related to a heart problem. While the authors attempted to account for this possible protopathic bias³⁶, it is hard to tease out the etiology of the potentially overlapping symptomatology. Furthermore, because domperidone is available over-the-counter in parts of Europe, it is conceivable that the number of people self-medicating with domperidone is higher than the rate actually quoted in the Dutch study (as the study only took into account prescriptions for domperidone³¹ and not over-the-counter use). This important fact may have skewed the results. Some other important limitations of the studies include the fact that key pieces of information are unavailable including smoking status and use of other non-prescription drugs—both of which can be important factors³⁷ in affecting the study results.

In summary, breastfeeding mothers using domperidone do not fall into the same demographics as the patients involved in the studies from which the warning was generated. Furthermore, with caution about the use of higher doses of domperidone stemming from a study where so few patients were actually on those higher doses, the Health Canada-endorsed warning regarding the use of domperidone in higher doses seems to be an over-reaction. Finally, taking into account the other drawbacks of these studies as outlined above, the evidence that domperidone actually causes ventricular arrhythmias or sudden cardiac death is not compelling.

Future Research

A number of research initiatives are currently underway in Canada looking at the safety and efficacy of Domperidone when prescribed specifically as a galactagogue.

In Montreal, the Herzl Family Practice Centre - Goldfarb Breastfeeding Clinic has initiated a retrospective chart review of 400 registered patients who were prescribed domperidone at doses ranging from 80 to 120 mg/day. The review will focus specifically on the incidence and severity of side-effects and adverse events presumed to be secondary to taking domperidone, although the sample size will be insufficient to detect an increased risk of torsade de pointes or other ventricular arrhythmias.

This year, EMPOWER (a prospective, randomized, double-blinded, placebo-controlled trial) gets underway. This study will look specifically at the efficacy and safety of domperidone (30 mg/day) prescribed specifically for lactation support in 560 mothers of preterm babies in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit setting. Over the course of the study, any adverse drug reactions will be reported directly to Health Canada. Furthermore, pre- and post-treatment maternal and infant ECG's will be done to characterize any arrhythmogenic disturbances caused by maternal domperidone use. Mothers will also be monitored for symptoms of arrhythmia which, if reported, will trigger additional immediate work-up including repeat ECG, the results of which will be reported in the study. The results of EMPOWER will hopefully provide evidence-based data regarding domperidone's safety (for both mother and baby) when prescribed at 30 mg/day as a galactagogue for mothers of preterm infants in the NICU, although here too, the sample size is insufficient to detect an increased risk of torsade de pointes or other ventricular arrhythmias.

There remain significant gaps in our knowledge and understanding of domperidone's effects on lactating mothers. This consensus group therefore strongly encourages further research looking at domperidone's use in lactating mothers. Particularly useful would be a randomized controlled trial to determine the relative efficacy of lower vs higher dose domperidone on breastfeeding success. Such a study would help justify whether or not there is a true need to titrate the dosage higher in mothers not responding adequately to 30 mg/day, and would be done in the out-patient setting. To address safety and low prevalence outcomes such as ventricular arrhythmias, it would also be worthwhile studying large pharmaco-epidemiologic databases (like the General Practice Research Database in the U.K.) that include large numbers of healthy lactating women. Databases of this magnitude can lend sufficiently robust power to better address low prevalence risks such as Torsade de Pointe.

Conclusion

Domperidone has a three-decade track record of use as a galactagogue to support breastfeeding mother/baby dyads. Importantly, to date, Health Canada has not received any reports of cardiac-related deaths in women taking Domperidone³⁵. Furthermore, the recent Health Canada-endorsed advisory, and the studies to which it refers, are neither compelling nor specific to breastfeeding mothers. Therefore, there is strong consensus among the experts in this group that the advisory does not present valid arguments to justify changing the long established domperidone prescribing practices among lactation physicians across Canada.

There is consensus among the experts in this group that domperidone, when appropriately prescribed, improves breastfeeding outcomes. However, this group does recognize that the above is largely based on expert opinion. As such, further studies designed to yield higher-level evidence are strongly encouraged to further explore this relationship.

Until the results of further research become available, healthcare practitioners should consider the following recommendations when prescribing domperidone to breastfeeding mothers:

1. Prior to considering prescribing domperidone, ensure that there is a persistent breastfeeding problem despite an adequate trial of intensive non-pharmacologic lactation support. This would include assessment and support from a lactation consultant.

2. Screen mothers for comorbid medical conditions (including a significant personal or family history of cardiac arrhythmia), the use of QT-prolonging medications, and drugs that may affect the activity and/or metabolism of domperidone.
3. Adequately discuss the risks and benefits of domperidone's use as a galactagogue to ensure that patients make an informed decision.
4. Prescribe domperidone at the lowest effective dose and titrate up as needed based on the mother's and/or the baby's response.
5. While a patient is on domperidone, ensure regular follow-up to monitor closely for efficacy, side effects and adverse reactions.

In conclusion, the health risks to baby and mother associated with not breastfeeding are significant, well described in the medical literature, and supported by high quality scientific studies:¹¹⁻³⁴. The unlikely life-threatening risks associated with taking domperidone are theoretical and not well supported by the scientific literature as it relates to the lactating patient. Considering the balance of medical risks and benefits to the mother and baby, the breastfeeding experts in this group feel that the Health Canada-endorsed advisory should be viewed with caution as it relates to the lactating population. The important health benefits that breastfeeding confers to both the mother and her baby outweigh the theoretical risk associated with domperidone's use.

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