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Breast cancer fears over birth drug legacy

By FIONA MACRAE and ARTHUR MARTIN, Daily Mail 09:26am 7th August 2006

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Women whose mothers took a common pregnancy drug face double the normal risk of breast cancer

Headlines

Women whose mothers took a common pregnancy drug face double the normal risk of breast cancer, research has found.

The discovery adds to the horrific legacy of the 'wonder drug' DES.

Routinely prescribed to pregnant women from the 1940s to 1970s to fight miscarriages, it has already been linked to a range of problems in their children. Now scientists in the U.S. have found the increased breast cancer danger.

An estimated 200,000 women in the UK took the drug. But medical records are incomplete and many of the women - and their children - may not even realise they did so and that there is an increased risk of illness. The U.S research indicates that the danger will grow as the 'DES daughters' approach menopause.

Doctors are now urging women whose mothers took the drug to examine their breasts regularly for signs of the cancer which kills 13,000 British women a year.

DES, diethylstilboestrol, has already been branded the 'silent thalidomide', after the morning sickness drug which handicapped thousands of babies.

Heather Justice, of DES Action UK, said last night: 'The damage wasn't obvious the moment babies were born but people are still suffering.'

The drug, a synthetic version of the female sex hormone oestrogen, was also known as Stilboestrol.

It was 'given out like Smarties' to prevent miscarriage and complications of pregnancy including morning sickness and high blood pressure.

Manufacturers urged doctors to give women the drug to ensure they had 'bigger,

stronger babies'.

Worldwide, six million women are believed to have taken it. The drug was withdrawn in 1975 when studies revealed its effects on unborn children.

As the DES daughters grew up, many developed cancers of the vagina and other disorders of the reproductive system.

The sons had low sperm counts and undescended testicles and it is thought they may be at increased risk of testicular cancer.

The mothers themselves had an increased risk of breast cancer. Now, it has been revealed that the daughters also do.

Boston University researchers compared rates of the disease in 4,000 'DES daughters' with those in 2,000 women whose mothers had not taken the drug.

Overall the DES daughters had a 40 per cent increased risk of the cancer. The risk increased with age, with those over 40 some 90 per cent more likely to get the disease.

For over-50s, the risk appeared to treble, although the low number in the study meant the researchers were not confident of this figure. The risk also increased with the amount of drug taken by the mother - and many women took it virtually throughout pregnancy.

Lead researcher Professor Julie Palmer said: 'This is really unwelcome news because so many women worldwide were prenatally exposed to DES and they are just now approaching the age at which breast cancer becomes more common.'

She said it was important women exposed to the drug are regularly screened for breast cancer.

She also advised them to avoid HRT, which contains oestrogen and increases the risk of breast cancer. The U. S. results are reported in the journal *Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention*.

In the UK, consultant obstetrician Dr Maggie Blott admitted last night there is no way of knowing how many women were affected by DES in the womb.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists urged DES daughters to be vigilant for signs of cancer.

'They need to learn how to examine their own breasts properly,' a spokesman said.

'They need to have a checkup with their GPs who may recommend they have mammograms earlier than usual.'

The Department of Health also advised anyone with a family history of DES use to ask their doctor for more frequent cancer screening.

Even where they are sure their mothers took DES, British victims have been unable to sue because the drug was sold by up to 100 manufacturers and they have no way of knowing which one was involved in their case.

Victims in other countries have obtained compensation, however, with the various drug companies all contributing to the payout.

Mrs Justice, 53, who developed vaginal cancer linked to DES when she was 25, accused successive British governments of sweeping the plight of sufferers under the carpet.

'Nothing has changed since DES Action UK was set up in 1989,' she said. But she stressed that the overall risk of DES daughters developing breast cancer was still small.

People who believe they may be affected can write to DES Action UK at PO Box 128, Blaydon, NE40 3YQ.

INVENTED in Britain in 1938, DES was hailed as a 'wonder drug' capable of preventing miscarriage by boosting oestrogen levels.

It was also given to relieve morning sickness and high blood pressure. But after 30 years of being prescribed routinely, it emerged DES caused abnormalities of the reproductive tract in both sexes and predisposed the babies to cancers in later life.

Those exposed to the drug suffer from withered fallopian tubes which make them infertile and face five times the risk of ectopic pregnancy. They are also up to three times more likely to miscarry.

SIDEBAR Story:

The victim living in fear again

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Heather Justice's mother took DES for five weeks during her pregnancy.

Although she had a healthy childhood, Mrs Justice developed vaginal cancer at 25.

The 53-year-old is now worried about breast cancer.

She said: 'It was known to be carcinogenic in the 1930s and 1940s and should never have been given out.'

'It is similar to thalidomide but with thalidomide babies the damage was obvious at birth. At 24 I was perfectly healthy with no symptoms. Yet at 25 I had cancer.'

'We've known since the Seventies about the risk of vaginal cancer, and now, as these women are getting to the menopause and there are hormonal changes, we are seeing breast cancers starting to emerge.'

Mrs Justice, a driving instructor from Jarrow, Tyne and Wear, who belongs to a support group for DES victims, added: 'No one has any idea how many women took DES.'

'The vast majority don't know they have been affected by this drug. People should be asking their mothers whether they can remember being prescribed it during their pregnancy, then insisting on proper screening and care.'