



PIC QUESTION OF THE WEEK: 9/12/11

Q: What is the role of fenugreek for enhancing milk production in breastfeeding women?

A: Fenugreek is a natural supplement and a member of the Fabaceae/Leguminosae family. It has been used to treat various conditions including diabetes, decreased appetite, dyspepsia, gastro-esophageal reflux disease (GERD), and hyperlipidemia. It has historically been employed to stimulate milk production in women who are breast feeding. Fenugreek and the prescription drug metoclopramide are classified as galactagogues, that is, compounds that increase the secretion and flow of milk. Domperidone, like metoclopramide, is a dopamine antagonist, but not *commercially* available in the United States. It is occasionally prepared by compounding pharmacies for this indication. Results from these prescription medications are variable and appear to be dependent upon baseline prolactin levels. Possible extrapyramidal effects from metoclopramide and reports of prolonged QT interval/torsade de pointes from domperidone must be considered before initiating therapy. Fenugreek is a *natural* alternative remedy, often recommended by lactation consultants and mid-wives as an option for mothers with less-than-desired milk production. Although widely recommended, there is limited evidence to support the effectiveness of fenugreek as a galactagogue. A MEDLINE search of fenugreek and breast feeding OR lactation identified only a few small studies. A Turkish trial consisting of 66 new mothers reported that the 22 who drank *herbal tea containing fenugreek* three times daily had significantly higher mean milk volumes than the group who drank *tea enhanced with apple extract* or the 22-patient group who *did not drink any tea*. Infants in the fenugreek treatment group had significantly less weight loss after birth and regained birth weight more quickly. No adverse reactions in the neonates or mothers were reported. Thomas Hale advises that although supporting data is minimal, fenugreek is commonly used as a galactagogue and generally produces positive results. He cites a study that included ten women who took fenugreek capsules three times daily to evaluate its effects on milk production. The average increase in milk volume was approximately 250 ml per day. No adverse drug effects were reported in this trial; however, allergic reactions and hypoglycemia have been described in some publications. Fenugreek is available in a variety of dosage strengths from a number of manufacturers of natural supplements. A specific treatment dose has not been established. Although supportive data is limited, it appears that fenugreek is a reasonable option for women requiring an increase in milk volume when breastfeeding.

References:

- Fenugreek. In: Jellin M, Gregory PJ, eds. Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database. www.naturaldatabase.com (Accessed 09/07/11).
- Turkyilmaz C, Onal E, Hirfanoglu IM, et al. The effect of galactagogue herbal tea on breast milk production and short-term catch-up of birth weight in the first week of life. *J Altern Complement Med* 2010;17:139-42.
- Hale TW. Maternal medications during breastfeeding. *Clin Obstet Gynecol* 2004;47:696-711.

Rachel M. Patterson and Julia R. Spinner, Pharm.D. Candidates

The PIC Question of the Week is a publication of the Pharmaceutical Information Center, Mylan School of Pharmacy, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA 15282 (412.396.4600).