A reversal of thinking: How women with lupus can increase chance for healthy pregnancies

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In the not so distant past, women with systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE), an autoimmune disease, were advised not to have children, and if they became pregnant, to have therapeutic abortions to prevent severe flares of their lupus. Research by rheumatologists at Hospital for Special Surgery in New York, in patients with lupus who have had successful pregnancies is yielding insights that support a reversal of that thinking.

The research effort, a multi-center research initiative lead by Jane Salmon, M.D., attending physician at Hospital for Special Surgery, is known as the PROMISSE (Predictors of pRegnancy Outcome: bioMarkers In antiphospholipid antibody Syndrome and Systemic lupus Erythematosus) Study.

Two research projects will be presented at this year's American College of Rheumatology meeting in San Francisco on October 24-29 by Dr. Salmon, based on data gathered from the PROMISSE Study. She and her collaborators identified factors that help a woman and her doctor plan for a healthy pregnancy.

Patients with lupus can live free of symptoms for long periods of time and then experience a disease "flare," when symptoms such as a red rash across the nose and cheeks, painful or swollen joints, swollen legs or extreme fatigue suddenly appear. The first presentation will examine whether problems during pregnancy can be correlated to the severity,

frequency and timing of disease flares. Dr. Salmon and her colleagues followed 198 pregnant patients with lupus. The investigators found that women who conceived while their disease was stable or only mildly active had relatively infrequent flares during their pregnancies and delivered healthy babies. This held true regardless of past disease severity or past kidney disease (a frequent consequence of lupus). The findings inform women with lupus on how to plan when to conceive to have a low risk pregnancy.

Lupus patients, as well as other patients with the antiphospholipid syndrome, produce special types of proteins called antiphospholipid antibodies that can attack their own tissues and cause pregnancy complications. The second study to be presented by Dr. Salmon showed that the presence of a specific subset of these autoantibodies is highly associated with poor pregnancy outcomes. Specifically, the researchers found that women who tested positive for an autoantibody called lupus anticoagulant were more likely to have complications such as miscarriage or preeclampsia during pregnancy.

These results can help doctors identify patients at high risk for complications by obtaining a blood test to determine if they are positive or negative for the lupus anticoagulant autoantibody. While women with lupus or the antiphospholipid syndrome who are positive for this protein can still have successful pregnancies, their doctors should monitor them more closely for early signs of pregnancy complications.

"Based on our new data, we believe we are in a position to help doctors counsel and care for their patients," says Dr. Salmon, Collette Kean Research Chair and co-director, Mary Kirkland Center for Lupus Research at HSS. "In the past, women were discouraged from becoming pregnant because of a very high risk to the mother and the baby. Our findings from the PROMISSE study show that women with lupus can have normal pregnancies when they work together with their doctors,

beginning with the decision of when it is safe to conceive and continuing with close follow-up to anticipate potential problems."

Source: Hospital for Special Surgery

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