Fatty Liver Disease May Drive Severe Itching During Pregnancy

In a study of pregnant women, intrahepatic cholestasis, which causes severe itching, was more common in those with fatty liver disease.

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Non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD) may be a driver of intrahepatic cholestasis in pregnancy (ICP), a severe complication in which bile acids build up in the bloodstream, causing extreme itching, MedPage Today reports.

Presenting their findings at Digestive Disease Week in San Diego, researchers conducted a retrospective, single-center study of women who delivered babies at Elmhurst Hospital Center in New York City in 2017. The cohort included 149 women diagnosed with ICP and 200 women whose medical records did not have bile acid level tests, which is considered a sign that they did not have signs of ICP.

The women in both groups had an average age of 30 years old and an average body mass index of about 27 (25 or greater is overweight). The rates of other metabolic risk factors were comparable between the two groups, including cholesterol, high blood pressure disorder and pre-gestational or gestational diabetes.

The study authors found that the women with fatty liver disease or steatosis (buildup of fat) on their liver imaging were 5.7 times more likely to develop ICP compared with the women who had no evidence of NAFLD. Compared with those without the disease, those with fatty liver were 3.29-fold more likely to develop ICP if they had biliary disease before their pregnancy and more likely to develop ICP if they had AST liver enzymes more than twice the upper limit of normal.

The study authors argue that the lack of differences in metabolic risk factors between those with and without ICP suggests a direct connection between NAFLD and ICP.

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