Characteristics of pregnant illicit drug users and associations between cannabis use and perinatal outcome in a population-based study

Marleen M.H.J. van Geldera,b, Jennita Reefhuisa,*, Alissa R. Catonc, Martha M. Werlerd, Charlotte M. Druschelc, Nel Roeleveldb, the National Birth Defects Prevention Study

a National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Mail Stop E-86, 1600 Clifton Road, Atlanta, GA 30333, USA
b Department of Epidemiology, Biostatistics and HTA, Radboud University Nijmegen Medical Centre, Nijmegen 6500 HB, The Netherlands
c Congenital Malformations Registry, Center for Environmental Health, New York State Department of Health, Troy, NY 12237, USA
d Slone Epidemiology Center at Boston University, Boston, MA 02215, USA

ABSTRACT

Background: According to the 2004 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 4.6% of American women reported use of an illicit drug during pregnancy. Previous studies on illicit drug use during pregnancy and perinatal outcomes showed inconsistent results.

Methods: This population-based study included mothers who delivered live-born infants without birth defects between 1997 and 2004 and completed interviews for the National Birth Defects Prevention Study (response rate 69%; n = 5871). Prevalence of self-reported illicit drug use (specifically cannabis, cocaine, and stimulants) during pregnancy and its associations with demographic and social factors were assessed. We used multivariable linear and logistic regression analyses to study the associations of cannabis use with birth weight and gestational age.

Results: The prevalence of reported illicit drug use during pregnancy was 3.6% (standard error 0.24). Pregnant users of cannabis, cocaine, and stimulants were younger, had a lower level of education and smaller household income, and were less likely to have used folic acid in the periconceptional period than nonusers. Illicit drug users were also more likely to have used alcohol and tobacco. After adjustment for confounding, cannabis use was not associated with mean birth weight or gestational age or with low birth weight or preterm delivery.

Conclusion: Women who report use of illicit drugs during pregnancy differ in demographic and socioeconomic background from nonusers. Reported cannabis use does not seem to be associated with low birth weight or preterm birth.

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1. Introduction

In 2004, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health indicated that 4.6% of American women of 15–44 years of age reported use of an illicit substance during pregnancy (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2005). Studies recently conducted in the U.S. report even higher prevalences of perinatal illicit drug use up to 12.4% (El-Mohandes et al., 2003). A few studies have shown that pregnant cannabis and cocaine users differ in background characteristics from non-using pregnant women (Shiono et al., 1995; Hutchins and DiPietro, 1997; El Marroun et al., 2008), but studies using a population-based random sample of U.S. live births are scarce.

Infants of women who used cannabis during pregnancy have been reported to have lower birth weights (Fergusson et al., 2002; El-Mohandes et al., 2003) and a decreased gestational age (Cornelius et al., 1995) compared to infants of nonusers. However, most studies did not find an association between cannabis use and low birth weight (LBW) (Shiono et al., 1995; English et al., 1997), gestational age, or preterm birth (Shiono et al., 1995; Fergusson et al., 2002). Nevertheless, several biological mechanisms by which cannabis could influence perinatal outcome have been proposed (Frank et al., 1990; Khare et al., 2006). Since children born preterm or with LBW have an increased risk of infant mortality and long-term morbidity (Phillips et al., 2006; Saigal and Doyle, 2008), identifying risk factors for these adverse outcomes is of importance.
2. Methods

2.1. The National Birth Defects Prevention Study (NBDPS)

The NBDPS is an ongoing population-based case–control study that includes case infants with major structural congenital malformations identified via 10 birth defects surveillance systems in Arkansas, California, Georgia, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Utah. Control infants are live-born infants without major birth defects from the same geographical areas, randomly selected from birth hospital records or birth certificates. Mothers are interviewed by trained interviewers via telephone in either English or Spanish between 6 weeks and 24 months after the estimated date of delivery. Questions are asked about demographic characteristics, maternal health, lifestyle factors, and occupation. The methods and enrollment of the infants have been described in detail elsewhere (Yoon et al., 2001; Cogswell et al., 2009). For this study, we selected all control infants born between October 1, 1997, and December 31, 2004 whose mothers completed the interview (n = 5871). The response rate was 69%.

2.2. Exposure and outcome assessment

Detailed information on the type, timing, and frequency of maternal illicit drug use during the period from 3 months before pregnancy until birth of the index child was available from the interview. We grouped the illicit substances reported by the mothers into five drug categories (cannabis, cocaine, stimulants, hallucinogens, and opioids) as described elsewhere (van Gelder et al., 2009). Nonusers were defined as women who did not report use of any illicit drug from 3 months before pregnancy through birth of the index child.

Data on birth weight and gestational age were obtained through abstraction of birth hospital records or birth certificates depending on how the infants were selected. During the examination of these data, some reporting inconsistencies were identified (e.g., an infant of 3104 g at 21 weeks of gestation). To address these implausible birth weight–gestational age combinations, we used the cutpoints of birth weight values within the range for their specific gestational age as proposed by Alexander et al. (1996). For the perinatal outcome analyses, infants with implausible birth weight–gestational age combinations (n = 146), infants with missing birth weight or gestational age data (n = 20), and mothers with multiple gestations (n = 174) were excluded.

2.3. Statistical analyses

We used basic descriptive statistics to describe the characteristics of women who used or did not use illicit drugs during pregnancy. The characteristics of interest were maternal age at delivery, race or ethnicity, level of education, household income, employment status, prepregnancy body mass index (BMI), gestational weight gain (women with a weight gain of >40 kg or a weight loss of >20 kg were excluded), parity, previous induced abortions, use of contraception before or during pregnancy, any periconceptional folic acid use (from 1 month before through the first month of pregnancy), and any use of alcohol and cigarette smoking during pregnancy as well as paternal drug use, since most of these factors are known to affect pregnancy outcome.

A priori power analyses (α = 0.05, study power 80%) showed that the prevalence of use of cocaine, stimulants, hallucinogens, and opioids was insufficient to study their effects on perinatal outcome with satisfactory statistical power. We used multivariable linear regression techniques to study the associations between cannabis use and birth weight and gestational age, in which we included the potential confounders maternal race/ethnicity (non-Hispanic white or other), level of education (0–12 years or >12 years), cigarette smoking, binge drinking (>4 drinks per sitting), and maternal age, prepregnancy BMI, and gestational weight gain as linear covariates. For the birth weight analyses, we also included gestational age as a linear term. These potential confounders were selected based on a priori knowledge and exploratory data analyses, including the findings of the descriptive analyses. Potential confounders were dropped from the model when their removal did not change the effect estimate for cannabis use by more than 10%. Similarly, we used multivariable logistic regression to study the associations between prenatal cannabis use and LBW [adjusted odds ratio (OR) 0.7, 95% confidence interval (CI): 0.3–1.6] or preterm birth (OR 1.0, 95% CI: 0.6–1.9) were found either. Stratification by trimester of use did not alter these results greatly, although cannabis use during the second trimester, especially among cigarette smokers, seemed to have a detrimental effect on birth weight. In addition, the risks of preterm birth seemed slightly increased among women who used cannabis in the second (OR 1.6, 95% CI: 0.8–3.3) or third trimester (OR 1.8, 95% CI: 0.9–4.0). We did not detect a dose–response effect of prenatal cannabis exposure on perinatal outcome (data not shown).

4. Discussion

In our study, women who reported using cannabis, cocaine, or stimulants during pregnancy were similar to one another, but different from other pregnant women in a number of demographic and lifestyle characteristics. In general, prenatal cannabis use did not seem to be associated with infant birth weight or gestational age. Although we adjusted for a broad range of confounders, residual confounding by factors that we were unable to measure remains possible.

The use of illicit substances during pregnancy is likely underestimated because respondents often falsely deny use for fear of judgment or prosecution or because of feelings of shame and guilt. Previous studies have shown that 18–34% of participants who test positive through toxicological screening were missed when a questionnaire was used (Lester et al., 2001; Bauer et al., 2005; Eyler et al., 2005). Therefore, misclassification of the exposure status of study infants has occurred, but this is most likely non-differential, especially since birth weight and gestational age were not the primary outcomes of interest in the NBDPS and evidence for recall bias among case–control studies of pregnancy outcome is scarce. Non-differential misclassification may have resulted in underestimation of (3.6%, S.E. 0.24). Cannabis was the most commonly used illicit drug (n = 189), followed by cocaine and stimulants (n = 27). Of the cocaine users, 22 women used powder cocaine, 1 woman used crack, and 4 women used a combination of both. Opioids and hallucinogens were reported by only 4 and 2 women, respectively. Most illicit drug users (84.3%) took one illicit substance, while 15.7% used two or more illicit drugs.

Women who reported use of cannabis, cocaine, or stimulants during pregnancy were on average younger than nonusers (Table 1). Cannabis users were more often non-Hispanic black and less often Hispanic than nonusers, whereas pregnant cocaine users were more often of Hispanic origin. Women who reported illicit drug use were more likely to have a low level of education, to have a household income below $20,000, or to be unemployed. They were also more often overweight (BMI < 18.5 kg/m²) than women who did not report use of illicit drugs during pregnancy. Cannabis users were more likely than nonusers to have excessive weight gain during pregnancy. Women who reported use of any illicit drug were less likely to have used folic acid in the periconceptional period. In addition, cannabis users were less likely to have had children before, but more likely to have had an induced abortion in the past. A similar pattern was seen for women who reported use of stimulants, but not for women who reported use of cocaine. Illicit drug users more often reported any use of alcohol or cigarette smoking during pregnancy and far more often reported that their partners used illicit drugs.

We included 5661 infants in the analyses of the associations between cannabis use and perinatal outcomes. After adjustment for confounding factors, there was no difference in mean birth weight (−17 g, P = 0.5) or gestational age (−0.1 weeks, P = 0.3) between cannabis-exposed and non-exposed infants (Table 2). No associations between cannabis use and LBW [adjusted odds ratio (OR) 0.7, 95% confidence interval (CI): 0.3–1.6] or preterm birth (OR 1.0, 95% CI: 0.6–1.9) were found either. Stratification by trimester of use did not alter these results greatly, although cannabis use during the second trimester, especially among cigarette smokers, seemed to have a detrimental effect on birth weight. In addition, the risks of preterm birth seemed slightly increased among women who used cannabis in the second (OR 1.6, 95% CI: 0.8–3.3) or third trimester (OR 1.8, 95% CI: 0.9–4.0). We did not detect a dose–response effect of prenatal cannabis exposure on perinatal outcome (data not shown).
of exposure frequencies and less precise estimates. However, the possibility of differential misclassification of prenatal illicit drug exposure status cannot completely be excluded.

In our study, women who reported cannabis and cocaine use during pregnancy had similar characteristics as those previously reported in the literature. However, there were some discrepancies, such as the lower level of education for cannabis users, the younger maternal age of cocaine users, and the fact that the majority of cocaine users were Hispanic as opposed to African American. Differences in selection and participation of the various study populations may explain these differences and our results.

In the U.S. in 2001, the prevalences of LBW and preterm birth were 7.7% and 11.9%, respectively (Martin et al., 2002), which is higher than those for LBW (4.7%) and preterm birth (7.9%) in our study population. This difference could be due to the fact that vital statistics data, in contrast with our study population, include children with birth defects who are often born preterm (Honein et al., 2009), but it could also be due to some selection in our population. A recent study showed that the NBDSR control participants, who constitute our study population, are generally representative of their base populations (COSG1999). Our findings suggest that prenatal cannabis use overall is not associated with birth weight or gestational age, which is consistent with previous studies (Shiono et al., 1995; English et al., 1997; Hutchins and DiPietro, 1997; Finch et al., 2001; Ferguson et al., 2002).

Further research is needed to determine the true association between illicit drug use and perinatal outcome, in which other approaches, such as blood, urine, or meconium analyses, might be used to assess exposure status. Furthermore, it remains uncertain whether prenatal cannabis exposure as well as exposure to other illicit drugs affects the occurrence of birth defects and developmental problems later in life.
Table 2


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug group</th>
<th>Cannabis use during pregnancy</th>
<th>Birth weight</th>
<th>Low birth weight</th>
<th>Gestational age</th>
<th>Preterm birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Users (n)</td>
<td>Nonusers (n)</td>
<td>β (95% CI)</td>
<td>Number (%) of cases</td>
<td>Odds ratio (95% CI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any cannabis use during pregnancy</td>
<td>185 (53)</td>
<td>5343 (49)</td>
<td>−17 (−90 to 56)</td>
<td>9 (4.9)</td>
<td>243 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non cigarette smokers</td>
<td>51 (17)</td>
<td>4557 (48)</td>
<td>−31 (−164 to 101)</td>
<td>11 (2.0)</td>
<td>189 (4.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarette smokers</td>
<td>134 (37)</td>
<td>785 (77)</td>
<td>−14 (−102 to 75)</td>
<td>8 (6.0)</td>
<td>54 (6.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First trimester cannabis use</td>
<td>174 (53)</td>
<td>5343 (49)</td>
<td>−5 (−81 to 72)</td>
<td>9 (5.2)</td>
<td>243 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non cigarette smokers</td>
<td>48 (16)</td>
<td>4557 (48)</td>
<td>−9 (−150 to 131)</td>
<td>1 (2.1)</td>
<td>189 (4.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarette smokers</td>
<td>126 (37)</td>
<td>785 (77)</td>
<td>−4 (−95 to 86)</td>
<td>8 (6.3)</td>
<td>54 (6.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second trimester cannabis use</td>
<td>76 (19)</td>
<td>5343 (49)</td>
<td>−100 (−202 to 1)</td>
<td>6 (7.9)</td>
<td>243 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non cigarette smokers</td>
<td>19 (6)</td>
<td>4557 (48)</td>
<td>−41 (−257 to 175)</td>
<td>1 (5.3)</td>
<td>189 (4.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarette smokers</td>
<td>57 (17)</td>
<td>785 (77)</td>
<td>−136 (−253 to 18)</td>
<td>5 (8.8)</td>
<td>54 (6.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third trimester cannabis use</td>
<td>53 (16)</td>
<td>5343 (49)</td>
<td>−89 (−209 to 30)</td>
<td>4 (7.5)</td>
<td>243 (4.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non cigarette smokers</td>
<td>16 (5)</td>
<td>4557 (48)</td>
<td>−99 (−316 to 118)</td>
<td>1 (6.2)</td>
<td>189 (4.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cigarette smokers</td>
<td>37 (11)</td>
<td>785 (77)</td>
<td>−87 (−233 to 59)</td>
<td>3 (8.1)</td>
<td>54 (6.9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Regression coefficient, which represents the difference in birth weight (g) or gestational age (weeks) between exposed and non-exposed infants, with 95% confidence interval.

b Adjusted for gestational age, maternal age at delivery, race or ethnicity, cigarette smoking, binge drinking (≥4 drinks per sitting), prepregnancy BMI, and gestational weight gain.

c Adjusted for gestational age and cigarette smoking.

d Adjusted for maternal age at delivery, race or ethnicity, cigarette smoking, binge drinking, prepregnancy BMI, and gestational weight gain.

e Adjusted for cigarette smoking, binge drinking, and gestational weight gain.

f Adjusted for gestational age, maternal age at delivery, race or ethnicity, maternity care, prepregnancy BMI, and gestational weight gain.

**Note:** All statistical tests were two-sided. Significance was tested at the 0.05 level.
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Contributors

Authors van Gelder, Reefhuis, Caton, Werler, Druschel, and Roeleveld designed the study. Van Gelder, Reefhuis, and Roeleveld wrote the protocol. Van Gelder and Caton conducted statistical analyses. Van Gelder wrote the first draft of the manuscript, all authors contributed to and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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References


