

Cough Syrup Use in Infants: A Dangerous Practice

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Dear Editor-in-Chief,

Sleep disturbance is a very common finding in patients with persistent cough (1). This is especially apparent in infants with common cold or influenza and the continuous crying can lead to considerable distress for the parents. Cough syrups which are easily available as over the counter medications can induce sleep, and many parents turn to this medication when their infant is suffering from persistent cough.

It has also come to attention that for many years, new mothers have been misusing cough syrup to put their hyperactive or complaining children to sleep. Since these drugs are available over the counter, parents feel complacent that these drugs have no side effects whatsoever and are safe to use in infants (2). However, numerous studies have reported infantile deaths due to cough syrup as a contributive cause as infants are more sensitive to such effects. A study conducted by Rimsza and Newberry identified ten cases of unexpected infant deaths wherein the toxicological evidence suggested recent administration of Over-the-counter (OTC) cough medication (3).

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not recommend over the counter cough medications for children below the age of two years old. The side-effects of such drugs can be severely fatal in children younger than two. Pediatric experts say that cough syrup is usually given to provide temporary relief from parenting duties and feel that this practice should be considered a form of child abuse (4).

Pediatricians should emphasize the dangers of cough syrup use below the age of two. Counseling regarding how to handle hyperactive children and safer alternatives to cough medicine should be suggested to solve this problem; and regarding a child's cough a valuable and harmless alternative such as honey could be used (5).

Key Words: Children, Flu, Medicine, Sleep.

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