The Use of Topical Vitamin A in Pregnancy

As the science and development of skin care continues to advance, Obstetric care providers are more frequently encountering the question: “Is Vitamin A safe to use in pregnancy?” More commonly, this question is being posed by a very anxious, newly pregnant woman who may have already been using a product with some form of Vitamin A, or “retinol” in it. Indeed, some form of Vitamin A seems to be in just about every topical skin cream from dermatologist prescribed, to some of the most commonly used skincare products bought in the local drugstore. With good reason. Vitamin A has long been known to be an important skin normaliser, it is responsible for the normal activity of skin cells, boosts production of collagen and natural moisturizing factors, controls sebum production and smooths out the texture and tone of the skin over time. It is easy to see why it has become a very essential ingredient to many women’s skin care regimine. Further, as the average age for childbearing women in many OB practices is in their mid to late thirties, many have already been on a well established skin care program that includes some form of Vitamin A well before their pregnancy.

By far, the most widely known fear about Vitamin A, is the strongest formulation, retinoic acid in the form of Accutane (used for the treatment of severe cystic acne), known to be highly associated with miscarriage and birth defects. Women who are planning pregnancy and are on Accutane will be counseled to discontinue the medication, usually six months prior to attempting pregnancy.

That being said, the cosmetic formulation of Vitamin A, is a far milder preparation known as retinol, retinyl acetate or retinyl palmitate. These formulations, when applied to the skin, do not get transported into the bloodstream, because the enzyme that is required to transport retinol into the blood stream does not exist in the skin. Pregnant women will get more Vitamin A in their bloodstream through diet, than through a cosmetic topical cream.

As is the case with any exposure or risk in pregnancy, there is no amount of information, testing or pre-planning that can absolutely guarantee a 100% perfect outcome 100% of the time. We also acknowledge that there is probably no other time in a women’s life where both mother and father to be, become more fearful, thoughtful, analytical, guilt-ridden…about everything the mom to be eats, drinks, breaths and in general experiences as she carries her pregnancy. Hopefully, the above information will help to decrease or put to rest, any untoward fear or angst over the use of a cosmetic topical Vitamin A preparation.

It may also be helpful to point out that after the first trimester, the fetus is essentially fully developed with respect to organogenesis, limb formation, etc. The best advice for a very anxious, newly pregnant mom, who has made an association with Vitamin A and potential pregnancy hazards, is to calm her fears. She will likely want to discontinue Vitamin A during the first trimester, possibly for the entire pregnancy and she absolutely should, if the concept is at all making her fearful.

We here at Timeless Faces/ Riversong Plastic Surgery do have non Vitamin A based skin care products and treatments that can meet the needs of you obstetrical patients. We are available for questions or consultation, Monday through Friday from 9am to 5pm.