Probiotics ineffective in treating infant colic

Probiotics are ineffective in treating infant colic, according to a new study by Murdoch Childrens Research Institute.

The study, which was published in the *British Medical Journal*, is the largest and most rigorous trial to date to show the probiotic *Lactobacillus reuteri*, is ineffective in treating both breast and formula fed infants with colic.

Infant colic, or excessive crying for no apparent cause, is extremely common and can have significant consequences for the baby and their mother’s mental health. It affects up to 20% of infants.

Recent studies have found differences in gut bacteria between infants with and without colic. Probiotics have been suggested as a possible treatment as they beneficially affect humans by improving the balance of bacteria in the digestive system.

In smaller trials in Europe, the probiotic *Lactobacillus reuteri* has previously been shown to be effective for breastfed babies only, however all trials had methodological weaknesses. In contrast, in this trial which involved 167 infants from Melbourne, Australia, there was no difference in crying and fussing between the probiotic and placebo groups whether the infant was breastfed or not.

The probiotic was also ineffective in improving infant sleep, maternal mental health and quality of life. In fact, infants in the probiotic group fussed more than the infants in the placebo group at most times during the study. The daily probiotic treatment did not lead to changes in the babies’ gut bacteria.

Lead researcher, Dr Valerie Sung, said in light of these findings, probiotics should not be used to treat all babies with colic.

“The results from this trial are contrary to existing evidence and clearly demonstrate that probiotics cannot be routinely recommended for all infants with colic. At this stage, probiotics should not be recommended for formula-fed babies with colic. It is still unclear whether probiotics could benefit certain groups of breastfed infants with colic.”

“More research is currently underway around the world and we are in the process of pooling data from this research to see which subgroups of infants, if any, could benefit from probiotics.”

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Available for interview:
Researcher, Dr Valerie Sung
Laura Conway, who participated in the study and her son Liam (2 years old)