



SHORT COMMUNICATION

# The use of fenugreek for breast feeding women

Denise Tiran\*

Department of Health and Social Care, University of Greenwich, Honeycomb Building, Mansion Site Avery Hill, Campus, Avery Hill Rd. London SE9 2PQ, UK

Fenugreek is widely used as a culinary spice and is frequently used in Indian Ayurvedic and in Traditional Chinese Medicine, particularly as a galactagogue to encourage lactation.<sup>1</sup> Little research appears to have been undertaken on the effectiveness of this spice and the majority of evidence for side-effects has arisen from case reports of complications.

Skin test patching appears to suggest a significant proportion of patients susceptible to fenugreek allergy. For example, allergic reaction to inhalation of fenugreek seed powder has resulted in wheezing, rhinitis and fainting, while dermal application of fenugreek paste for dandruff of the scalp in an asthmatic woman caused facial oedema, numbness of the head and wheezing.<sup>2</sup> Mild gastrointestinal symptoms have also been reported.<sup>3</sup> This may be due to allergenic chemicals occurring naturally within the plant, or to the presence of substances such as nitrates from the soil in which the plant is grown, as has occurred in certain areas of Jordan.<sup>4</sup> Research on the use of fenugreek by non-insulin diabetic patients has shown a small reduction in fasting and post-prandial blood sugar levels, but a more statistically significant decrease in total cholesterol and triglyceride levels of patients with coronary artery disease.<sup>5,6</sup>

Of more concern is the potential for fenugreek to interact with prescribed pharmacological medications, notably warfarin<sup>7,8,9</sup>. It is also possible that fenugreek may potentiate antihypertensive and antidiabetic medication<sup>3</sup> and increase the risk of bleeding in women requiring non-steroidal anti-inflammatories, especially aspirin.<sup>10</sup>

With reference to women who are breast feeding, the following recommendations can be extrapolated from these findings:

- fenugreek should be used with caution in women who are asthmatic or who have pre-existing gastrointestinal upset,
- doses should be as low as possible to achieve the required therapeutic effect,
- skin patch testing in women with sensitive skin may be advisable,
- it should be avoided in women who are diabetic, hypertensive or who have cardiac disease,
- women taking warfarin or aspirin should be advised against using fenugreek,
- women who choose to use fenugreek for its galactogogic action should refrain from using it for a prolonged period of time; it may be advisable to perform blood clotting and blood glucose studies.

## References

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\*Tel.: +44-208-331-8494.

E-mail address: [m.d.tiran@greenwich.ac.uk](mailto:m.d.tiran@greenwich.ac.uk) (D. Tiran).

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