Randomized Field Trial of Vaginal Douching, Pelvic Inflammatory Disease, and Pregnancy


Several case-control studies had reported that women who use vaginal douche products are at increased risk for pelvic inflammatory disease. Women who douche regularly, however, may do so for reasons related to their risk of acquiring a sexually transmitted infection, which is an important risk factor for pelvic inflammatory disease. Controlling for sexual risk factors is hindered by inaccurate information that results in residual confounding, making it difficult to remove confounding of this association in nonexperimental studies.

One way to address this problem is to randomize women to use a douche product or an alternative. We conducted a multicenter randomized field trial with a one-year follow-up period. The trial included 1,827 women age 18–34, all of whom were regular users of a douche product. All eligible women had no current indication of pelvic inflammatory disease and had been treated recently for a sexually transmitted bacterial infection or bacterial vaginosis, and were therefore at high risk for pelvic inflammatory disease. Women were randomly assigned to use either a newly designed and marketed douche product or a soft cloth towelette, and were resupplied with product without cost at each bimonthly follow-up visit. We measured the occurrence of pelvic inflammatory disease and recorded pregnancy occurrence among participants.

We found little difference in pelvic inflammatory disease risk between the two groups, a finding that implied that the results of the nonexperimental studies were confounded by unmeasured difference in sexual risk factors for pelvic inflammatory disease. We also found, however, that the probability of becoming pregnant was 15% lower among women assigned to use a douche product, and 33% lower among women who doused more frequently.