Effect of Buprenorphine Implants on Illicit Opioid Use Among Abstinent Adults with Opioid Dependence Treated with Sublingual Buprenorphine: A Randomized Clinical Trial

BACKGROUND:
- Opioid dependence is a chronic, relapsing disorder that is associated with the spread of HIV and hepatitis C and has become a growing concern in the United States.
- Medical treatment of opioid dependence decreases illicit opioid use at a greater rate compared with psychosocial intervention or placebo alone.
- In a previous trial, buprenorphine implants were superior to placebo implants in reducing illicit opioid use over the initial 6-month treatment period.

OBJECTIVE
- To determine if 6-month subdermal buprenorphine implants maintained low to no illicit opioid use relative to daily sublingual buprenorphine among currently stable opioid-dependent patients receiving buprenorphine maintenance treatment.

METHODS
- **Design:** Randomized, double-blind, double-dummy, active-controlled, 26-week, multisite study
- **Inclusion Criteria:** Participants must have a primary diagnosis of opioid dependence, be 18 to 65 years old, have received sublingual buprenorphine for at least 24 weeks as an outpatient at a stable dosage of 8 mg/d or less, and showed no evidence of opioid withdrawal or illicit opioid-positive urine samples for at least 90 days prior to study entry. Female participants of childbearing potential agreed to use contraception during the study.
- **Exclusion Criteria:** Pregnancy, lactation, or planning pregnancy; lack of appropriate implant sites (recent scars, history of keloids); coagulopathy within 90 days; screening serum aspartate and alanine aminotransferase levels 3-fold higher than upper limits of normal; total bilirubin or creatinine levels 1.5-fold higher than upper limits of normal; clinically significant thrombocytopenia; use of strong cytochrome P450 3A4 inhibitors (azole antifungals, macrolide antibiotics, or protease inhibitors) or an anticoagulant; chronic pain requiring opioids; AIDS; significant medical problems potentially affecting volunteer safety if enrolled; primary diagnosis of substance dependence other than opioids or nicotine; or pending legal action or other factors/conditions that could adversely affect participant safety and adequate adherence.
- **Primary Outcome Measure:** The difference in proportion of responders, defined as participants with at least 4 of 6 months without evidence of illicit opioid use (based on urine test and self-report composites) by treatment group.
- **Secondary Outcome Measures:** Treatment retention, time to first illicit opioid use, percentage of illicit opioid use by month, and cumulative percentage of negative illicit opioid urine results at 6 months. Opioid craving, withdrawal, and supplemental use of sublingual buprenorphine were also measured. Safety (based on adverse event reporting, including implant site reactions) was assessed in all participants receiving study medication.
- 177 patients were randomized into two groups
  - 87 patients to receive daily sublingual buprenorphine tablets (dosage same as pre-randomization) with 4 placebo subdermal implants.
  - 90 patients to receive daily sublingual placebo tablets with 4 active buprenorphine implants.
- Power 87.3% with non-inferiority established for a lower bound of the 95% CI greater than -0.20 (calculated based on a sample size of 90 participants per group [180 participants overall], assuming a 75% responder rate for both treatment groups).
- Data handling method was intent-to-treat.

RESULTS
• 165 patients completed the study (81 in the implant group and 84 in the tablet group).

**Primary Outcome Measure:** In the implant and tablet groups, 81 of 84 participants (96.4%) and 78 of 89 participants (87.6%), respectively, were responders. The difference was 8.8% (1-sided 97.5%CI, 0.009 to ∞; P < .001 for non-inferiority; P = .03 for superiority)

**Secondary Outcome Measures:** There was a significant difference 13.8% in cumulative 6 months without evidence of opioid use (95% CI, 0.018-0.258; P < .03). Time to first evidence of illicit opioid use was significantly longer for implants relative to tablets (hazard ratio, 0.49; 95% CI, 0.25-.97; P = .04). There were no significant differences in craving, withdrawal, and supplemental use (P = .83, P = .92, and P > .05, respectively). Serious adverse events occurred in 5 participants (3 in the tablet group and 2 in the implant group).

**Author’s conclusion:** Among adults with opioid dependence maintaining abstinence with a stable dose of sublingual buprenorphine, the use of buprenorphine implants compared with sublingual buprenorphine did not result in an inferior likelihood of remaining a responder.

**STRENGTHS**
- Study design was gold standard: Double-blind, double-dummy, active controlled
- Adherence was measured by visual inspection and palpitation of each implant and via pill counts at each study visit,
- Urine screenings were not only performed at monthly visits, but also 4 times randomly throughout the course of the trial.

**LIMITATIONS**
- Not powered to detect differences in adverse outcomes
- Generalizability is limited because the majority of participants were white, employed, and had at least a high school education.
- Participants were clinically stable, maintained abstinence for at least 90 days, and prior to randomization, were in buprenorphine treatment for an average of 3.5 years.
- Dose of buprenorphine was not uniform among all participants.
- Many conflicts of interest between the authors and the pharmaceutical companies.

**CONCLUSION**
- Although this study both proved the non-inferiority and superiority of buprenorphine implants to sublingual tablets, these results are not generalizable to the population.
- Future research:
  - A study should be done to determine the effectiveness of buprenorphine implants in people that are newly diagnosed with opioid dependency and who are not yet clinically stable.


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