

Journal Watch

The Efficacy of Haloperidol in the Management of Nausea and Vomiting in Persons with Cancer.

Reference: Hardy JR, O'Shea A, White C, et al. J of Pain and Symptom Management 2010; 40: 11-116

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Abstract: Context. Haloperidol is used commonly for the control of nausea and vomiting in palliative care patients, but there is very little evidence to support its use.

Objectives. To assess the efficacy of haloperidol as an antiemetic in patients with cancer and N/V not related to cancer treatment.

Methods. Patients with an N/V score of at least 1 on a 4-point scale were prescribed either oral or subcutaneous haloperidol/ N/V and toxicity were assessed daily for the duration of the study (maximum 5 days) by both the patient and an observer (health professional).

Results. At Day 2, 33 of 42 (79 %) treated patients were assessable for response. Eight (24%; 95% confidence interval {CI}: 10%-39%) patients had complete control of N/V and 12 (36%; 95% CI: 20%-53%) had partial control, giving an overall response rate of 61% (95% CI: 44%-77%). At Day 5, 23 patients were assessable for response. The overall response rate was 17 of 23 (74%; 95% CI 56%-92%). If all patients are included in the response analysis, the overall response rates at Days 2 and 5 were 47% and 40%, respectively.

Conclusion. Haloperidol has some efficacy in the treatment of N/V in this patient group. The results from this uncontrolled study provide pilot data from which to plan future controlled trials of antiemetics in the palliative care population.

Strengths:

A good attempt at an antiemetic trial despite the number of shortcomings were identified by the authors. The authors should be commended for maintaining the trial open for accrual for a period of just less than 2 years.

Weaknesses:

Many identified by the authors:

- Limited (5 day),

- Uncontrolled open label trial with limited accrual and high attrition rate.

- Single assessment scale used to evaluate nausea and vomiting responses.

- Exclusion criteria were numerous likely impacting accrual rates.

- Level of initial dosing of haloperidol was selected based on 'the treatment level thought appropriate for that patient.'

Further explanation of the latter is not provided.

Relevance to Palliative Care: There is a strong need for well conducted comparative trials of antiemetics for nausea and vomiting in patients with advanced cancer. Despite the numerous weaknesses, this small study is a step in the right direction.