

The history of thalidomide

The drug thalidomide was prescribed as a sedative in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Many pregnant women were given it to help them sleep and to combat nausea. Tragically, doctors were unaware that when thalidomide is taken during pregnancy, it grossly interferes with the development of the foetus.

Around the world, 10-12,000 babies were born with severe malformations of their limbs and/or internal organs. 5,000 survive today. No one will ever know how many babies were never born or how many died in the first few days of life as a result of thalidomide. The drug was subsequently banned.

A warning from those who know the dangers

The Thalidomide Victims Association of Canada (TVAC) was founded in 1988 to empower and enhance the quality of life of Canadian victims of thalidomide.

Thalidomide victims will never accept a world with thalidomide, and do not support its return. They have, however, chosen not to oppose an individual's right to make an informed decision to use thalidomide.

Today, the Association has undertaken a new mandate to warn the public of the drug's devastating effects, so that a recurrence of the thalidomide tragedy can be avoided. Patients who take thalidomide must be made fully aware of the side effects and dangers and make "risk-aware" choices, knowing all the facts.

Those who forget history are destined to repeat it.

The Thalidomide Victims Association of Canada has more information available on this topic. Please contact us at:

The Thalidomide Victims Association of Canada

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Thalidomide Information Series – Brochure # 1
(aussi disponible en français)

Sources

Recognition of thalidomide defects, RW Smithells, and CGH Newman

Does Thalidomide Cause Second Generation Birth Defects?
Dick Smithells

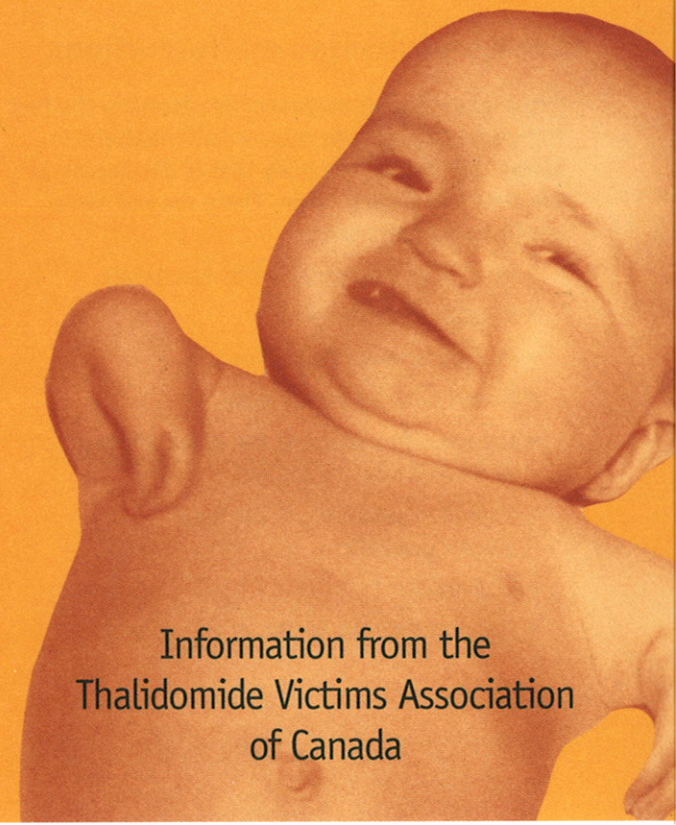
Cover and inside baby photo courtesy of Celgene Corporation.

Thalidomide Survivors; a questionnaire survey on musculoskeletal abnormalities, general health, and quality of life, Steven M. Edworthy, Shawna Edworthy, Gregor Wolbring

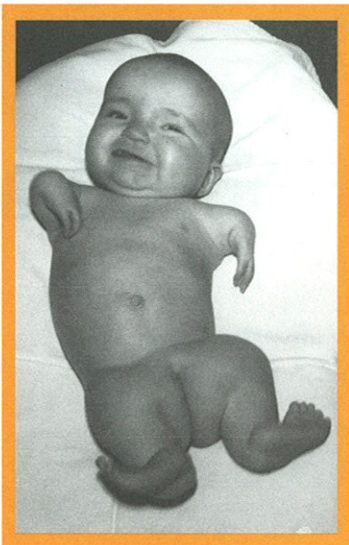
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Thalidomide

Malformations Caused by Thalidomide



Information from the
Thalidomide Victims Association
of Canada



PHOCOMELIA

is the limb malformation most commonly associated with thalidomide. The word phocomelia is from the Greek words phoke meaning "seal" and melos meaning "limb", in which the hands and/or feet start immediately at the main joint (shoulder/hip).

Thalidomide malformations are almost all bilateral/symmetrical. That means both sides of the body are affected in the same way (both arms, both legs, all four).

Other thalidomide malformations

When taken during pregnancy (particularly the first trimester) thalidomide causes malformations to almost any part of the body that is developing at the time the drug is taken. These are just some resulting malformations:

- Missing or malformed limbs (bilateral)
- No ears or deafness
- Missing or extra fingers or toes
- Partial or total loss of sight
- Improper formation of the heart, kidney and other internal organs
- Improper formation of the anus and/or genitalia
- Cleft palate
- Flattening of the bridge of the nose

Thalidomide Chronology

- **Thalidomide became available in West Germany on October 1, 1957. Although never licenced for sale in the United States, it was available in sample form in the U.S. from 1958 to 1961.**
- **In Canada, thalidomide became available in sample form in 1959, was licenced April 1, 1961, and although it was withdrawn March 2, 1962, it was still available in some pharmacies as late as May 1962.**
- **In Canada, most thalidomide victims were born between March 1960 and December 1962.**

The pain continues

Victims of thalidomide who survived, are now adults in their 30's and 40's. They have endured pain, discrimination, isolation and a denial of adequate compensation. Today, they face an uncertain future. Their limbs and organs continue to degenerate and they experience a diminished quality of life. Doctors cannot predict what their life expectancy may be.

Note: Thalidomide malformations cannot be passed from generation to generation.

Many genetic conditions produce malformations similar to thalidomide

There are no blood tests to identify victims of thalidomide, and many genetic conditions can produce malformations resembling those caused by thalidomide. The limb malformation phocomelia is not limited to thalidomide victims, but has existed throughout history.

It is important to know the cause of a malformation so that in non-thalidomide cases, genetic counselling can be planned, allowing individuals to make informed choices on reproduction and possible treatment.

Some conditions mistaken for thalidomide malformations

- Roberts syndrome (pseudothalidomide syndrome)
- Holt-Oram syndrome, also known as Heart-Hand syndrome
- Fanconi's panmyelopathy
- TAR syndrome (thrombocytopenia-absent radius)
- Cornelia de Lange syndrome
- VATER association
- FFU syndrome
- LADD syndrome
- Poland anomaly
- Wildervanck syndrome
- Möbius syndrome
- Goldenhar syndrome
- Duane syndrome

If you wish more information on these conditions, contact the **Thalidomide Victims Association of Canada** at the address on the back of this brochure.