

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

Victims of thalidomide – now adults in their 30's and 40's – 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.

## 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. 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.

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.

Patients taking thalidomide must be made fully aware of the side effects and dangers and make "risk-aware" choices knowing all the facts.

**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 # 2  
(aussi disponible en français)

### Sources

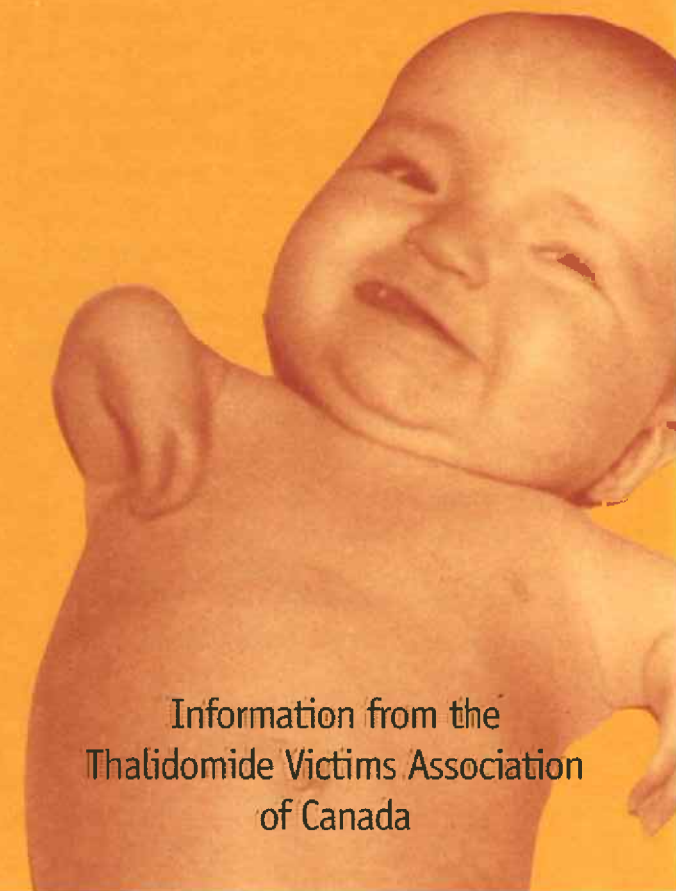
*Thalidomide Survivors: a questionnaire survey on musculoskeletal abnormalities, general health, and quality of life, Steven M. Edworthy, Shawna Edworthy, Gregor Wolbring*

*Cover and inside baby photo: courtesy of Celgene Corporation.*

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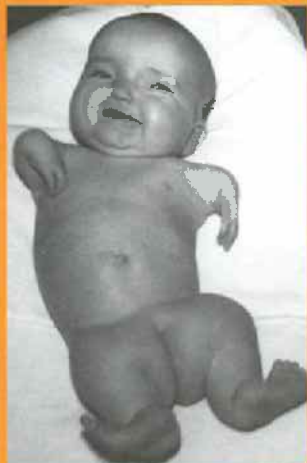
# Thalidomide It's Back

## Understand the Risks



Information from the  
Thalidomide Victims Association  
of Canada

**If you take thalidomide during pregnancy, your baby will be born with severe birth defects similar to these or may even die.**



This baby girl was one of thousands born in the late 1950's and early 60's. Her mother, unaware of the devastating effects of thalidomide on a foetus, was given thalidomide during pregnancy. Although many mothers took only one or two tablets of thalidomide, it

was enough to cause severe birth defects and disabilities such as phocomelia, a condition in which the hands and/or feet start immediately at the main joint (shoulder/hip). Many babies died in their first year and we will never know how many were never born.

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

## Preventing a tragedy – it's up to you!

Before taking thalidomide, you must know all the risks involved and all of the side effects. You have a responsibility to follow your doctor's instructions carefully and to read all of the educational material provided.

## If you are considering taking thalidomide:

- You must not be pregnant or become pregnant. If you take thalidomide when you are pregnant, your unborn baby may die or be born with birth defects that can cause a lifetime of suffering.
- If you are a woman taking thalidomide, you will be asked to take regular pregnancy tests and must prevent any chance of pregnancy by using two forms of birth control.
- If you are a man taking thalidomide, always wear a latex condom when you have sex.

**The only method of birth control that is 100% effective is abstinence.**



**• Never share thalidomide with any other person. Remember, even one tablet will cause birth defects in a developing foetus**

- Return any unused thalidomide tablets to your pharmacy.

**Follow your doctor's instructions carefully and make sure you understand them!**

## Side effects

In addition to effects on a foetus, you yourself may experience some unpleasant and dangerous side effects while taking thalidomide. All patients, male or female, young or old, are at risk for these effects

**Peripheral Neuritis is a form of nerve damage that can be painful and irreversible. You may feel a tingling, burning or loss of sensation in your hands and/or feet. It may progress to include cramps in your muscles, weakness and loss of coordination. If you have any of these symptoms, stop taking thalidomide immediately and contact your doctor.**

Other side effects you may experience:

- drowsiness (which can be severe)
- skin rash (with or without fever)
- mood changes – including giddiness
- puffiness of the face and limbs (edema)
- irregular menstrual period
- blood sugar that is too high or low
- fast heart beat
- slow heart beat
- low blood pressure
- low white blood cell count
- "buzzing in the ears"
- dry mouth
- headaches
- nausea
- constipation
- increased appetite
- dry skin
- itching
- thyroid problems
- dizziness
- allergic reactions

**Report all side effects to your doctor immediately.**