THE INCIDENCE OF NEPHROCALCINOSIS IN VERY LOW BIRTH WEIGHT NEONATES

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Abstract: The risk of nephrocalcinosis (NC) in preterm neonates is considerable, but conflicting numbers are given for the actual incidence (10-65%). Furosemide induced hypercalciuria is said to be the main risk factor. We assessed prospectively the incidence, causes and outcome of NC in very low birth weight (less than 1500 g) preterm neonates by serial renal ultrasound scans and urine analysis. Infants born elsewhere and transferred after 24 hours of age were excluded, as those who where discharged or died before 7 days of age. Two infants developed NC, giving an overall incidence of 4% in the study group. The follow-up showed persisting NC in both preterm neonates. Urinary investigations showed no consistent findings in infants with NC. In conclusion, the incidence of NC was lower in our population than is usually reported. Routine renal ultrasound scanning of very low birth weight preterm neonates is valuable in detecting NC.

Key words: Nephrocalcinosis, hypercalciuria, ultrasound scan, very low birth weight, preterm neonate

INTRODUCTION

Nephrocalcinosis (NC) refers to diffuse precipitation and growth of either calcium oxalate (CaOx) or calcium phosphate in the parenchyma of the kidney (1, 2). In 1982, Hufnagle et al. described NC in preterm neonates for the first time (3). In a recent study, postmortem examinations of 44 preterm and term infants showed deposition of typical CaOx in 18.5% and both calcium phosphate and CaOx in 4.5% (4).

Ultrasonography (US) has been found to be a sensitive and reliable method for the detection of NC (5-7). Cortical NC is defined as multiple, fine granular crystal deposition within the renal cortex leading to an increase in echogenicity. In contrast, medullary NC first looks like slight papillary crystal deposition which is later followed by an increase in such crystal deposition, visible in a change of corticomedullary differentiation in renal ultrasound (8).

The incidence of NC in preterm neonates varies widely from 10% to 65%, depending on different study populations, US criteria and US equipment and gestational age (4, 9-18).

In the first months of life, NC can develop as a result of an imbalance between stone-inhibiting and stone-promoting factors. Furosemide therapy, because of its hypercalciuric effects, is the most frequently mentioned provoking factor for the development of NC in preterm neonates (2, 10, 16).

In infancy, medullary NC can develop as a result of renal tubular acidosis, hypervitaminosis D,
The incidence of nephrocalcinosis

In 64%, acute respiratory syndrome developed, 26% had an infection, and 24% developed apnea bradycardia syndrome. Bronchopulmonary dysplasia was not observed in any case. Microscopy of urine did not show hematuria or other abnormalities in any infant, and although osmolality and pH varied, there was no association between any measurement and nephrocalcinosis. In addition to two infants with NC, we did not find any structural abnormality in the urinary tract on ultrasound.

We did not observe complete remission of NC in affected infants 3 months after discharge. Both of the infants with NC at term showed NC at the age of 3 months.

**DISCUSSION**

The incidence of NC was lower in our population of preterm neonates compared to that in the literature (4, 10-14), which may reflect improvements in neonatal intensive care, in particular the antenatal use of steroids and surfactant and improved nutrition.

Ultrasound scanning has proved to be a useful and effective mean for diagnosing NC. The greater sensitivity of modern ultrasound equipments in diagnosing NC suggests that early reports may have underestimated the incidence of NC (10, 14, 24). Cramer et al. reported a sensitivity of 96% and specificity of 85% using ultrasound compared with computed tomography and postmortem histological diagnosis in a rabbit model (6). NC develops during the neonatal period when preterm infants are exposed to various risk factors (2, 6, 10, 13, 18, 25). The incidence of NC was rather low in our population of preterm infants compared to that in the recent literature (Table 1).

Prospective studies and improvements in diagnostic ultrasound have allowed earlier detection of NC in large numbers. Different diagnostic criteria are probably responsible for the even higher incidence reported by Jacinto et al. (10). One reason for the difference in the data given in the literature with incidence numbers ranging from 10% to 65% is the different approach and interindividual interpretation of ultrasound examinations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References</th>
<th>Year of publication</th>
<th>Incidence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jacinto et al.</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>65% (20/31)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Woolfield et al.</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>8.3% (3/36)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short and Cooke</td>
<td>1991</td>
<td>27% (21/79)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sheu et al.</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>10% (5/50)</td>
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<tr>
<td>McCormick et al.</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>18% (8/44)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Campfield et al.</td>
<td>1997</td>
<td>16% (17/104)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Present series</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>4% (2/50)</td>
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</table>

Campfield et al. observed NC in 16% of preterm infants when using a 7.5 MHz transducer, but only in 6% when using a 5 MHz transducer (4). The extreme incidence (65%) in the study by the Jacinto et al. (10), might also be explained by such a difference in technique when compared with newer studies (7.5 vs. 5MHz transducer) (10, 13). We used both a 5 MHz and 7.5 MHz transducer for renal US. The lower incidence of NC in the recent studies could also be explained by improvements in the treatment of preterm infants: time of mechanical ventilation decreased, furosemide dosages were reduced and the duration of parenteral nutrition was shorter. For example, in the study of Short and Cooke, mean duration of mechanical ventilation was 41 days in infants with NC (13), but it was only 9 days in our patients.

All studies seem to confirm that smaller and more immature infants are more susceptible to calcification. Consistently, the mean gestation of our patients was higher than those reported by Ezzedeen et al. (17). In this study, both affected boy and girl were equally at risk, similar to other investigations (12).

Possible causes of increased medullary echogenicity in the preterm infants other than NC are renal candidiasis, cytomegalovirus infection, infantile polycystic kidney disease or renal vein thrombosis (19-21, 26). These causes were excluded in our patients’ population. Urinary tract infections (UTI) might occur frequently in infants with NC (3, 9). In this study UTI did not occur in any of 2 infants with NC. Both of the infants with NC at term showed NC at the age of 3 months. This is inconsistent with the results of Saarela et al., demonstrating that the ultrasonographic
abnormalities that develop in the first months of life disappear in the majority of patients within a period of months to years (16).

Furosemide therapy, because of its hypercalciuric effects, is most frequently mentioned provoking factor for the development of NC in preterm neonates (3-10, 16), but Schell-Feith et al. showed that furosemide is not the major cause of the early development of NC in preterm neonates (18). In our study, only 2 (4%) of 36 (72%) preterm infants receiving furosemide, had NC. Thirty six of 50 infants had received furosemide, so we can not have the furosemide prescription as a main risk factor in developing NC. We do not know the exact cause of NC, but both infants with NC had a longer time of hospitalization and total parenteral nutrition and we can claim that these factors have some effects on incidence of NC.

Calcium excretion was higher than normal range in both infants with NC and in the group without NC; there were only three cases with higher calcium excretion. In our study, both infants with NC had received dexamethasone and we may suggest this as a risk factor of nephrocalcinosis. One of 2 preterm infants with NC was under mechanical ventilation for a long time and we can assume this as a risk factor of NC.

In conclusion, US is a valuable modality in diagnosing NC in very low weight preterm neonates. We suggest that US should be included as a routine part of the evaluation of the preterm babies. It is necessary to perform more studies to realize the risk factors of developing of hypercalciuria and NC, and probably discovering the methods of prevention and treatment of NC in this group of neonates.

REFERENCES

The incidence of nephrocalcinosis


