

Fetal pleural effusion and Down syndrome

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Summary

Fetal pleural effusion is a rare abnormality that results from accumulation of fluid in the chest cavity. It can be classified as primary fetal hydrothorax and secondary fetal hydrothorax. The underlying causes of pleural effusion are still unknown, and the current treatment strategies are mainly based on symptoms. The prognosis of fetal pleural effusion varies significantly, ranging from spontaneous resolution to perinatal death. Recent advances in prenatal diagnostic methods and treatment such as thoracoamniotic shunting have significantly improved the survival rates for patients with or without hydrops.

Keywords: Pleural effusion, Down syndrome, etiology, diagnosis, treatment, prognosis

1. Introduction

Fetal pleural effusion is an abnormality resulting from accumulation of fluid in the chest cavity, and the condition was first described by Carroll in 1977 (1). Fetal pleural effusion is a rare condition, with a reported incidence ranging from 1/10,000 to 1/15,000 (2-4). The incidence of fetal pleural effusion in newborns ranges from 2.2 to 5.5 per 1,000 births (5). The underlying causes of fetal pleural effusion are still unclear; it can occur as an initial symptom of hydrops fetalis, but it can also occur in isolation (6).

2. Causes and classifications

Fetal pleural effusion can be classified as primary fetal hydrothorax and secondary fetal hydrothorax. Primary

fetal hydrothorax, also known as congenital chylothorax, can result from multiple lymphatic vessel anomalies or thoracic cavity defects caused by external force, a tumor, or cardiovascular diseases (7). It can occur unilaterally or bilaterally and affects males more than females at a ratio of 2:1; primary fetal hydrothorax has a perinatal mortality rate of 22% to 53% (8,9). Secondary fetal hydrothorax is a feature of immune and non-immune hydrops. Autoimmune conditions include Rh or ABO blood type incompatibility; non-immune factors include chromosomal abnormalities, genetic disorders, infections, congenital cardiac anomalies, congenital lung anomalies, hematologic diseases, metabolic diseases, and noncardiac anomalies (10). Hydrops is usually bilateral, and is also often associated with ascites, pericardial effusion, subcutaneous edema, hydramnios, and placental thickening. The most common causes of non-immune hydrops are chromosomal anomalies such as Down syndrome and Turner syndrome, which can also be present with additional structural abnormalities (1,4).

3. Diagnosis

The treatment of fetal hydrothorax and patient prognosis are closely associated with its specific causes (11-15); therefore, a detailed prenatal examination and evaluation must be performed. Steps include identification of maternal blood type and screening serum specific antibodies to exclude immune hydrops, detection

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Table 1. Characteristics and outcomes of Down syndrome cases with fetal or neonatal hydrothorax

Author	Case number	Time of detection	Unilateral or bilateral	Hydramnios (Yes/No)	Structural abnormalities (Yes/No)	Hydrops (Yes/No)	Intervention (Yes/No)	Karyotype	Outcome
Yoss <i>et al.</i> (1977) (1)	1	Neonatal period	Unilateral (right)	No	No	No	No	47,XY,+21	Alive
Footo <i>et al.</i> (1986) (22)	1	Neonatal period	Unilateral (left)	Yes	AVSD	No	No	46,XY,-22,+t(21q:22q)	Alive
	1	34 weeks of gestational age	Unilateral (right)	Yes	No	No	No	46,XY,t(21:21)	Unknown
	1	28 weeks of gestational age	Unilateral (left)	Yes	AVSD	No	No	47,XY,+21	Unknown
Modi <i>et al.</i> (1987) (23)	1	Neonatal period	Unilateral (right)	Unknown	No	No	No	47,XX,+21	Alive
Rodeck <i>et al.</i> (1988) (24)	1	32 weeks of gestational age	Unilateral (right)	Yes	AVSD	No	No	47,XX,+21	Alive
Blott <i>et al.</i> (1988) (25)	1	32 weeks of gestational age	Unilateral (right)	Unknown	ASD	No	Thoracoamniotic shunting	Trisomy 21	Alive
Petrikovsky <i>et al.</i> (1991) (26)	1	34 weeks of gestational age	Bilateral	No	No	No	No	Trisomy 21	Alive
	1	18 weeks of gestational age	Bilateral	No	Fifth digit clinodactyly	No	No	47,XX,+21	TOP
Ilagan <i>et al.</i> (1992) (27)	1	32 weeks of gestational age	Bilateral	Yes	No	Yes	No	47,XX,+21	Neonatal death after 3 days of birth
Hamada <i>et al.</i> (1992) (28)	1	36 weeks of gestational age	Bilateral	No	No	Yes	No	47,XY,+21	Alive
Sherer <i>et al.</i> (1993) (29)	1	18 weeks of gestational age (resolved after 1 week)	Unilateral (left)	No	Fifth digit clinodactyly	No	No	47,XY,+21	TOP
Achiron <i>et al.</i> (1995) (30)	1	18 weeks of gestational age	Unilateral	No	No	No	No	47,XX,+21	Alive
	1	28 weeks of gestational age	Bilateral	No	No	No	No	47,XY,+21	IUD
Yamamoto <i>et al.</i> (1996) (31)	1	32 weeks of gestational age	Bilateral	No	No	Yes	No	47,XX,+21	Alive
Rotmensch <i>et al.</i> (1997) (32)	1	24-28 weeks of gestational age	Unknown	Unknown	Pyelectasis	Yes	No	Trisomy 21	Unknown
Puddy <i>et al.</i> (1999) (33)	1	29 weeks of gestational age	Bilateral	Yes	No	Yes	Thoracocentesis (29 weeks of gestational age); Thoracoamniotic shunting (29 weeks of gestational age)	46,XX/47XX,+21 mosaicism	Alive
Turan <i>et al.</i> (2001) (34)	1	Neonatal period	Bilateral	Unknown	No	No	No	47,XY,+21	Alive
Hwang <i>et al.</i> (2003) (35)	1	Neonatal period	Unilateral (left)	Unknown	No	No	No	47,XY,+21	Alive
Picone <i>et al.</i> (2005) (36)	1	Pregnancy period	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Thoracoamniotic shunting	Trisomy 21	TOP
	1	Pregnancy period	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Thoracoamniotic shunting	Trisomy 21	IUD
Kallanagowdar <i>et al.</i> (2006) (37)	1	Pregnancy period	Unilateral (left)	Unknown	AVSD, fifth digit clinodactyly	No	No	47,XX,+21	Alive
Rocha <i>et al.</i> (2006) (38)	1	Neonatal period	Unilateral (left)	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	No	Trisomy 21	Alive
	1	Neonatal period	Bilateral	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	No	Trisomy 21	Neonatal death
Albano <i>et al.</i> (2007) (39)	1	32 weeks of gestational age	Unilateral (right)	Yes	Hepatic hemangioma	Yes	No	47,XX,+21	Alive
Kim <i>et al.</i> (2008) (40)	1	32 weeks of gestational age	Bilateral	Yes	Posterior urethral valve	No	Repeated amniocentesis, then thoracoamniotic shunting and vesicoamniotic shunting	47,XY,+21	Alive
Ergaz <i>et al.</i> (2009) (41)	1	Neonatal period	Right	Unknown	AVSD, TOF	No	No	47,XY,+21	Alive
	1	Neonatal period	Bilateral	Unknown	VSD	Yes	No	47,XY,+21	Alive

Abbreviations: ASD, atrial septal defect; AVSD, atrioventricular septal defect; IUD, intrauterine death; TOP, termination of pregnancy; VSD, ventricular septal defect.

Table 1. Characteristics and outcomes of Down syndrome cases with fetal or neonatal hydrothorax (continued)

Author	Case number	Time of detection	Unilateral or bilateral	Hydramnios (Yes/No)	Structural abnormalities (Yes/No)	Hydrops (Yes/No)	Intervention (Yes/No)	Karyotype	Outcome
Yinon <i>et al.</i> (2010) (42)	3	Pregnancy period	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Trisomy 21	Unknown
Ugras <i>et al.</i> (2010) (43)	1	Neonatal period	Left	Unknown	Anal atresia, VSD	No	No	47,XY,+21	Alive
Casario <i>et al.</i> (2010) (44)	3	Pregnancy period	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Trisomy 21	Unknown
Ruano <i>et al.</i> (2011) (45)	5	Pregnancy period	Unknown	Unknown	Ventriculomegaly; complex heart defect; absence of nasal bones	Unknown	Unknown	Trisomy 21	Unknown
Karagol <i>et al.</i> (2012) (46)	1	30 weeks of gestational age	Unilateral (right)	Yes	Fifth-finger clinodactyly	No	No	47,XY,+21	Alive
Bialkowski <i>et al.</i> (2015) (47)	1	Newborn	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Trisomy 21	Alive
Mallmann <i>et al.</i> (2016) (48)	14	Pregnancy period	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Thoracoamniotic shunting	Trisomy 21	Unknown
Li <i>et al.</i> (1998) (49)	1	Pregnancy period	Bilateral	No	No	No	No	46,XY,+21-3	Neonatal death
Guan <i>et al.</i> (1998) (50)	1	Pregnancy period	Unilateral (right)	No	Congenital hypothyroidism	No	No	47,XY,+21	Neonatal death
Wei <i>et al.</i> (2005) (51)	1	Neonatal period	Unilateral (left)	Unknown	Known	No	No	47,XX,+21	Alive
Hu <i>et al.</i> (2007) (52)	1	Pregnancy period	Unilateral (right)	No	ASD	No	No	46,XY,-14,+t(21;14)	Alive
Li <i>et al.</i> (2009) (53)	1	Pregnancy period	Unilateral (left)	No	No	No	No	47,XX,+21	Alive
Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2011) (54)	1	Neonatal period	Bilateral	Yes	No	Yes	No	Trisomy 21	Neonatal death
Zhang <i>et al.</i> (2011) (55)	1	Neonatal period	Left	Unknown	No	No	No	47,XY,+21	Alive
Jiang <i>et al.</i> (2012) (56)	1	Pregnancy period	Unknown	Unknown	Pulmonary defect	Unknown	No	Trisomy 21	TOP
La <i>et al.</i> (2014) (57)	1	23 weeks of gestational age	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	No	Trisomy 21	Neonatal death
Li <i>et al.</i> (2015) (58)	1	Neonatal period	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	No	Trisomy 21	Neonatal death

Abbreviations: ASD, atrial septal defect; ABS, atrioventricular septal defect; IUD, intrauterine death; TOP, termination of pregnancy; VSD, ventricular septal defect.

of infectious factors including TORCH, syphilis, and parvovirusB19, and performing a K-B test to exclude fetal maternal transfusion syndrome. A careful ultrasound examination should also be performed to observe the placenta, amniotic fluid, and fetal structure (and especially the fetal heart), and pulse Doppler should be used to detect the blood flow spectrum of the umbilical artery, middle cerebral artery, and venous system (16,17). Karyotyping or genetic testing is also routinely performed, especially in fetuses in which early pleural effusion has been detected (18-21).

4. Hydrothorax and chromosomal anomalies

Studies have shown that chromosomal anomalies are associated with fetal and/or neonatal hydrothorax. Table 1 summarizes the literature regarding characteristics and outcomes of Down syndrome cases involving patients with fetal or neonatal hydrothorax.

5. Treatment and prognosis

The prognosis for fetal pleural effusion is highly variable and difficult to predict, ranging from spontaneous resolution to progression to fetal hydrops and eventual perinatal death (59-64). The current strategy for treatment of fetal pleural effusion is based more on symptoms rather than underlying causes. Primary hydrothorax with small volumes of pleural fluid and no hydrops is more likely to resolve or remain stable, so more conservative treatment can be provided. Aubard *et al.* reported that the survival rate for conservative treatment of primary hydrothorax was 24% when hydrops was present and 75% when it was not (60), and Rustico *et al.* noted similar survival rates of 35% and 73%, respectively (4). Survival rates have improved significantly in recent years, and Wada *et al.* (21) reported survival rates of 58% and 97.8%, respectively, that can be largely attributed to improved methods of neonatal treatment. Thoracentesis is easy to perform and can reduce distress and improve fetal pulmonary development, but the procedure must be repeated after 24-48 hours in many patients, so thoracoamniotic shunting is usually recommended for fetuses with hydrops (65). Recent studies have indicated that the survival rate for congenital hydrothorax with hydrops is around 60% for patients treated with thoracoamniotic shunting, approximately 50% for those treated with thoracentesis, and from 35% to about 60% for those receiving conservative treatment (4,21).

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