

Ntia HN
Anah MU
Udo JJ
Ewa AU
Onubi J

Prevalence of hypoglycaemia in under-five children presenting with acute diarrhoea in University of Calabar Teaching Hospital, Calabar

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Ntia HN (✉) Anah MU, Udo JJ,
Ewa AU
Department of Paediatrics

Onubi J
Department of Chemical Pathology,
University of Calabar Teaching
Hospital, PMB 1278, Calabar,
Nigeria.

Email: mnhappiness237@yahoo.com

Abstract Background: The clinical features of hypoglycaemia and severe dehydration are similar, and these two can occur in a child presenting with acute diarrhoea. Hypoglycaemia occurring in a growing brain is deleterious and must be detected and treated.

Objective: To determine the prevalence of hypoglycaemia among under-five children presenting with acute diarrhoea in UCTH, Calabar.

Method: This was a prospective study of 150 children aged six weeks to five years presenting with acute diarrhoea in UCTH, Calabar from June 1st to October 31st 2008. Consecutive children who met the inclusion criteria were recruited into the study. Blood samples were collected for random blood sugar and serum electrolyte estimation using One Touch Ultra Test Strips 2006 model and Flame photometry respectively.

Results: The overall prevalence of

hypoglycaemia in under-five children presenting with acute diarrhoea was 4%. There was no sex difference. It was commonest among children of the low socio-economic class (83.3%). Risk factors to developing hypoglycaemia were longer duration of fast feeds greater than five hours and severe dehydration, both reaching statistically significant differences ($p=0.022$ and 0.002 ; FET respectively). Forty percent of patients who died had hypoglycaemia constituting 33.3% of patients with hypoglycaemia.

Conclusion: Children with diarrhoea complicated with severe dehydration are prone to developing hypoglycaemia. It causes high mortality and thus this parameter should be checked for and managed on time.

Key words: Hypoglycaemia, acute diarrhoea, under-five children.

Introduction

Diarrhoea is a common cause of childhood morbidity and mortality in the developing world accounting for an estimated 1.7 million under-five deaths globally.¹⁻³ An estimated one billion episodes of diarrhoea occur yearly among under-five children in Africa, Asia and Latin America.² The peak age incidence of childhood diarrhoea is 6-24 months.⁴ This is attributable to poverty and ignorance among affected groups who usually constitute up to 80% of the population.

It has been observed that in developing countries, including Nigeria, childhood diarrhoea is grossly under-reported and the incidence, underestimated.^{5,6} In developing countries, there is an inverse relationship between breastfeeding and diarrhoea-related mortality.⁷⁻⁹ Diarrhoea kills infants directly as a result of shock, and indirectly, as a major cause of protein energy malnutrition, especially marasmic-kwashiorkor.^{2,5,7}

Acute diarrhoea can be complicated by electrolyte imbalance, dehydration and hypoglycaemia.¹⁰⁻¹⁴

Interestingly, the symptoms of severe dehydration and hypoglycaemia are similar, and hence difficult to differentiate.¹⁰⁻¹² Indeed, the two complications may operate in concert with a consequent worsening of morbidity and mortality, thus an early detection and treatment of hypoglycaemia in such patients would be expected to improve outcome.¹² The prevalence of hypoglycaemia varies from time to time and from place to place. For instance, in the same centre in Dhakar different prevalence rates were recorded at different times by Bannish et al¹⁰ and Huq et al.¹¹ Key words: Hypoglycaemia, acute

The aims of the current study were, therefore, to determine the prevalence of hypoglycaemia among diarrhoea admissions in the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital, Calabar as well as identify its risk factors and outcome in these children.

Subjects and Methods

The study was conducted in the Diarrhoea Treatment and Training Unit (DTU) of the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital (UCTH), Calabar, where children with acute diarrhoea are managed. The DTU is a subunit of the children's emergency room (CHER). The unit was established in 1995, and provides a 24-hour service. The medical team in the CHER consists of consultants, senior and junior residents in paediatrics, house officers and paediatric-trained nurses.¹⁵

In the DTU, children receive oral rehydration solution (ORS), and their mothers are trained on home management of diarrhoea. In addition, the DTU offers training for medical students, nurses, resident doctors and house officers. It has a median admission of 20-40 patients per month. Admission peaks are recorded during the dry season. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Hospital. In addition, a written consent was obtained from the Care givers.

Consecutive children aged six weeks to 59 months presenting with acute diarrhoea and had not received oral rehydration solution (ORS) before admission into the DTU were recruited. Subjects who were less than six weeks, or those that had received ORS and whose parents did not give consent were excluded.

On enrolment, a questionnaire detailing bio-data (age, sex, parents' educational level and employment), history of duration of diarrhoea, presence of vomiting, 24hrs food recall and time of last feed were completed for each subject. This was done by the principal investigator who was occasionally assisted by a House officer in training in the unit.

Information obtained was on a one-on-one basis with the parent/guardian of the children. Socioeconomic class (SEC) was assigned to each subject using Olusanya et al¹⁶ classification. Physical examination was carried out with emphasis on weight, height, pallor, and level of dehydration.

Finger prick was done to estimate random blood sugar and venous blood taken into a plain bottle for serum electrolyte estimation. Random blood sugar was tested using the One Touch Ultra Test Strip 2006 model and serum electrolyte with Flame photometer model 420 with two channels. Hypoglycaemia was considered at blood sugar level below 2.2mmol/l, hypokalaemia at serum potassium level below 3.2mmol/l and hyponatraemia at serum levels of sodium below 132mmol/l as well as metabolic acidosis at serum level of bicarbonate below 22mmol/l. These are reference values for our laboratory. All the equipment used were standardized on a daily basis before use.

Data collected were checked for accuracy and entered into a computer. Epi-Info (version 2002) was used. Data analysis was done using stata version 10. A Stat-

trans software was used to import data from Epi-Info. Descriptive statistics included frequency and percentages were made. Categorical variables were compared using the chi-square test which was used to identify the validity of the observed differences in the prevalence. Fisher's exact test (FET) was used for frequency tables with cells with small numbers (<5). The level of statistical significance was $P < 0.05$.

Results

One hundred and fifty subjects were recruited for the study; there were 80(53.3%) males and 70(46.7%) females, with a male: female ratio of 1.1:1. The mean age of the subjects was 14.6 ± 10.5 months. The peak age prevalence for diarrhoea was at 2-11 months constituting 46.7% of the study population. A large proportion (78.7%) of the children was of the low socioeconomic class. Five (3.3%) out of 150 children died during the study period with hypoglycaemia contributing 40% of the mortality.

Out of the 150 children that were studied, six children (4%) had hypoglycaemia, with a male to female ratio of 1:1. Vomiting was present in 81 children among whom four had hypoglycaemia, while of the 69 children who did not have vomiting, two had hypoglycaemia. The difference in vomiting in children with hypoglycaemia and those without hypoglycaemia was not statistically significant, $P = 0.684$ (FET). Ninety-eight (65.3%) children were fed within five hours prior to presentation, while 52(34.7%) children had not eaten for more than 5 hours before presentation. Those who had not fed for more than 5 hours before presentation were more likely to develop hypoglycaemia than those who ate within 5 hours prior to presentation, $p = 0.022$ (FET), Table 1

Table 1: Blood glucose status and time of last feed prior to presentation

Blood glucose status	Time of last feeds in hours (%)		Total
	<5 hours	>5 hours	
Hypoglycaemia	1(16.7)	5(83.3)	6(100)
Nomoglycaemia	97(67.4)	47(32.6)	144(100)
Total	98(65.3)	52(34.7)	150(100)

Fisher's exact = 0.022

Of the six who had hypoglycaemia, two (33.3%) were moderately dehydrated while four (66.7%) had severe dehydration. The difference was statistically significant between children who had hypoglycaemia and dehydration and those who did not have dehydration, $p = 0.002$ (FET), Table 2.

Table 2: Blood glucose and hydration status

Blood glucose status	Hydration status			Total
	Mild	Moderate	Severe	
Hypoglycaemia	0	2	4	6(4%)
Nomoglycaemia	9	13	122	144(96%)
Total	9	15	126	150 (100%)

Fisher's exact = 0.002

Five children (83.3%) out of the six subjects who had hypoglycaemia were from the lower socioeconomic class. The relationships between hypoglycaemia and serum electrolytes did not reach statistically significant difference. Only one out of ten children who had hyponatraemia also had hypoglycaemia, $p=0.340$ (FET). Nineteen children had hypokalaemia out of whom one also had hypoglycaemia, $p=0.558$ (FET). Out of the sixty-six children who had metabolic acidosis, five children had hypoglycaemia, $p=0.086$ (FET).

Although five out of six children who had hypoglycaemia also had metabolic acidosis, but this was not statistically significant. This is most probably due to the small number (5) compared to the large number of children (61) that had metabolic acidosis alone.

The mean length of stay in the hospital was 3.8 days (SD=4.1). Three (2.1%) children out of the 144(97.9%) children who did not have Hypoglycaemia died while two (33.3%) of the six children who had hypoglycaemia died. The difference in death in children with or without hypoglycaemia was statistically significant, $p=0.013$ (FET). Table 3.

Table 3: Outcome of the study population (N=150)

Outcome	Hypoglycaemia		Total	FET
	Present	Absent		
Duration of admission (days)				
≤ 2 days	1(1.9)	52(98.1)	53	0.304
Compared				
> 2 days	5(5.2)	92(94.8)	97	
Discharge	4(2.8)	141(97.3)	145	0.013
Compared				
Death	2(40.0)	3(60.0)	5	

Figures in bracket represent percentage.

Discussion

The overall prevalence rate of hypoglycaemia among children with diarrhoea in the DTU of the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital was 4%. This prevalence is comparatively lower than 11% and 9.2% recorded earlier by Huq et al¹¹ in Dhakar, as well as that of Reid and Losek¹² in Minnesota USA, respectively. Though our sample size was smaller as compared to 196 and 782 in

these respective studies^{11,12} the difference in prevalence was not due to differences in methodology or sensitivity of the instrument since they were comparable. However, this prevalence is comparable to the 4.5% reported by Bennish et al¹⁰ also in Dhakar. There were slightly more males than females admitted into DTU in this study, though not statistically significant. This was similar to the 1.4:1 male to female ratio recorded on childhood diarrhoea admissions in the same centre four years earlier.¹⁵ The reasons for this male preponderance are not quite clear.

The assertion by Mitra et al¹⁷ of delay in presentation to hospital of females nor Madrigal¹⁸ assertion that males are the pillars of the family cannot stand the inheritance system in Calabar, an Efik tribe predominant community where both sexes have equal rights (personal communication with parents and some indigenes).

More than half of our subjects were below 24 months of age in this study, which agrees with other reports that diarrhoea is more common in children aged less than 24 months^{4,5,9,11,15}. Many reasons have been advanced for this high incidence in children less than 24 months, one of which is the causative agent that is common in this age group. Our study did not assess the causative agent. Wearing food and poor hygiene have also been implicated.

Hypoglycaemia was more in the low social class in this survey. This group is exposed to the vicious cycle of poverty, hunger and disease; hence it was not surprising that hypoglycaemia was commonest in this group.

Furthermore, parents tend to withhold feeds on the belief that it would reduce the frequency of diarrhoea especially when accompanied with vomiting hence the possible reason while hypoglycaemia was common. Longer duration of last feeds was found to be a risk factor to the development of hypoglycaemia. This is consistent with the earlier observations of Reid and Losek¹². The probable explanation may be due to the fact that these patients have low levels of gluconeogenic substrate, thus when counter regulatory hormones are secreted, the glycogen stores are easily depleted and so enough glucose is not produced¹¹. More so, our patients had not received any form of oral rehydration solution prior to presentation which could further explained the reduced blood sugar level.

There was no statistically significant association between vomiting and the development of hypoglycaemia in children with acute watery diarrhoea. However, there is a tendency to withholding feeds from these children, to reduce vomiting and this could lead to starvation and hence hypoglycaemia. It is both difficult to know the quality as well as the quantity of food consumed especially in our community where food items are consumed at random and children commonly share food as group consumption from one plate. Thus no significant association was found with hypoglycaemia. In our study, most of our patients were below two years, thus the

presence of other co-morbidities like malaria, pneumonia and septicaemia could increase their chances of having hypoglycaemia as earlier reported^{11,19}.

A significant association was found between severe dehydration and hypoglycaemia. Hypoglycaemia observed in these children may have been due to reduced blood supply to the liver with subsequent reduction in glucose metabolism. The clinical importance of this finding is that children who are admitted with diarrhoea complicated by severe dehydration should have their blood sugar checked as they are likely to develop hypoglycaemia.

Generally the association between serum electrolytes and hypoglycaemia was not statistically significant but most of our subjects with hypoglycaemia had metabolic acidosis. This agrees with the study by Wathen et al.²⁰ who reported abnormally low levels of bicarbonate as a significant finding associated with hypoglycaemia in children who were severely dehydrated, as well as those requiring intravenous fluid administration.

The overall case fatality of children with diarrhoea and hypoglycaemia was 33.3%. This was a little higher than

the 28% reported by Huq et al.¹¹. This shows that hypoglycaemia must be identified and treated in children with diarrhoea.

Conclusion

The prevalence of hypoglycaemia in diarrhoea admissions was 4%. Longer duration from time of last feeds and severe dehydration were risk factors to developing hypoglycaemia. Mortality was high in the children who had both diarrhoea and hypoglycaemia. Thus there is need to intensify education on continued oral feeding and administration of ORS during diarrhoea episodes in children to reduce severe dehydration and subsequent hypoglycaemia.

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