E-ISSN 2250-0944

ISSN 2250-1150
doi: 10.48047/ijprt/15.02.370

Research Article

Biochemical Markers of Oxidative Stress in Intrauterine Growth Restriction (IUGR)

Iram Shahzadi[1], Rafia Javed[2], Shaheen Khan Bahadar[3], Safoora Anjum[4], Muzamil Liaqat Ali[5], Nadeem Abbas[6]

Affiliations:

[1] Senior Registrar, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Alfalah International Hospital, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
[2] Assistant Professor, Biochemistry, Ameer ud Din Medical College / PGMI, Lahore.
[3] Assistant Professor, Urology, Allama Iqbal Medical College / Jinnah Hospital, Lahore.
[4] Associate Professor, University College of Medicine and Dentistry, Lahore.
[5] Assistant Professor, Biochemistry, University College of Medicine and Dentistry, Lahore.
[6] Associate Professor, Biochemistry, University College of Medicine and Dentistry, Lahore.

***Corresponding Author: Iram Shahzadi**

Abstract

Intrauterine Growth Restriction (IUGR) is a significant obstetric complication characterized by suboptimal fetal growth, often due to placental insufficiency. Emerging evidence suggests that oxidative stress plays a pivotal role in the pathophysiology of IUGR. This study aims to evaluate the levels of various oxidative stress biomarkers in neonates diagnosed with IUGR compared to appropriate for gestational age (AGA) controls. The objective is to identify potential biomarkers that could serve as early indicators of IUGR and provide insights into its underlying mechanisms.

A cohort of 100 neonates, comprising 50 diagnosed with IUGR and 50 AGA controls, was analyzed. Serum levels of malondialdehyde (MDA), superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase, ischemia-modified albumin (IMA), homocysteine, nitric oxide (NO), and nucleated red blood cells (NRBCs) were measured. Statistical analysis revealed significantly elevated MDA and homocysteine levels in the IUGR group, indicating increased oxidative stress. Conversely, antioxidant markers such as SOD and catalase were significantly reduced in the IUGR group, suggesting compromised antioxidant defense mechanisms.

These findings underscore the critical role of oxidative stress in the pathophysiology of IUGR. The identification of specific biomarkers provides a foundation for developing diagnostic tools and therapeutic strategies aimed at mitigating oxidative damage in IUGR-affected pregnancies.

Keywords: Oxidative stress, Intrauterine Growth Restriction, Biomarkers

Introduction

Intrauterine Growth Restriction (IUGR) is a condition characterized by impaired fetal growth, resulting in a birth weight below the 10th percentile for gestational age. It is associated with increased perinatal morbidity and mortality, as well as long-term health complications such as cardiovascular diseases and metabolic disorders. The etiology of IUGR is multifactorial, with placental insufficiency being a primary contributor. Recent research has highlighted the role of oxidative stress in the pathogenesis of IUGR.1-4

Oxidative stress refers to an imbalance between the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and the antioxidant defense mechanisms. During normal pregnancy, low to moderate levels of ROS are essential for placental development and function. However, excessive ROS production can lead to cellular damage, inflammation, and endothelial dysfunction, contributing to placental insufficiency and fetal growth restriction. Markers of oxidative stress, such as malondialdehyde (MDA), superoxide dismutase (SOD), catalase, and ischemia-modified albumin (IMA), have been investigated as potential indicators of oxidative damage in IUGR.5-8

This study aims to evaluate the levels of these oxidative stress biomarkers in neonates diagnosed with IUGR compared to appropriate for gestational age (AGA) controls.9-10 By identifying specific biomarkers associated with IUGR, this research seeks to enhance the understanding of its pathophysiology and contribute to the development of diagnostic and therapeutic strategies.

Methodology

A total of 100 neonates were enrolled in this study at Alfalah International Hospital, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in collaboration with Ameer ud Din Medical College / PGMI, Lahore , comprising 50 diagnosed with IUGR and 50 AGA controls. Inclusion criteria for the IUGR group included neonates with a birth weight below the 10th percentile for gestational age, confirmed by ultrasound measurements and clinical assessment. Exclusion criteria included neonates with congenital anomalies, chromosomal abnormalities, or maternal conditions such as diabetes mellitus or hypertension.

Serum samples were collected from all neonates within 24 hours of birth. The levels of oxidative stress biomarkers—MDA, SOD, catalase, IMA, homocysteine, NO, and NRBCs—were measured using standard laboratory techniques. MDA levels were quantified using the thiobarbituric acid reactive substances (TBARS) assay, SOD and catalase activities were assessed spectrophotometrically, IMA levels were determined by enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA), and homocysteine and NO levels were measured using high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC). NRBC counts were obtained through peripheral blood smears and manual counting.

Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software version 26.0. Continuous variables were expressed as mean ± standard deviation, and categorical variables were presented as frequencies and percentages. Comparison between groups was conducted using independent t-tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for categorical variables. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results Tables

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Study Population

Variable	**IUGR Group (n=50)**	**AGA Controls (n=50)**	**p-value**
Maternal Age (years)	28.6 ± 4.2	29.1 ± 4.5	0.52
Parity (Primipara/Multipara)	30/20	28/22	0.68
Gestational Age (weeks)	37.1 ± 1.4	38.0 ± 1.2	0.01*
Birth Weight (g)	2100 ± 180	3200 ± 210	<0.001*
Mode of Delivery (Vaginal/C-section)	35/15	32/18	0.55

Explanation: The IUGR group had significantly lower gestational age and birth weight compared to AGA controls, confirming the clinical diagnosis of growth restriction.

Table 2: Serum Oxidative Stress Biomarkers

Biomarker	IUGR Group (n=50)	AGA Controls (n=50)	p-value
Malondialdehyde (MDA, µmol/L)	5.2 ± 1.0	2.8 ± 0.7	<0.001*
Superoxide Dismutase (SOD, U/mL)	42.5 ± 5.1	55.3 ± 4.8	<0.001*
Catalase (U/mL)	28.4 ± 3.5	37.2 ± 4.0	<0.001*
Homocysteine (µmol/L)	15.8 ± 3.2	10.5 ± 2.4	<0.001*
Ischemia-Modified Albumin (IMA, U/mL)	0.65 ± 0.12	0.63 ± 0.11	0.45
Nitric Oxide (NO, µmol/L)	28.7 ± 4.5	29.5 ± 3.9	0.38

Explanation: MDA and homocysteine were significantly elevated in IUGR neonates, while SOD and catalase were significantly lower, indicating oxidative stress. IMA and NO did not differ significantly.

Table 3: Nucleated Red Blood Cell (NRBC) Counts

Parameter	IUGR Group (n=50)	AGA Controls (n=50)	p-value
NRBC Count (/100 WBC)	12.5 ± 3.8	6.1 ± 2.2	<0.001*

Explanation: NRBC counts were significantly higher in the IUGR group, suggesting fetal hypoxia and stress during intrauterine life.

The demographic characteristics of the study population are presented in Table 1. There were no significant differences between the IUGR and AGA groups regarding maternal age, parity, or mode of delivery.

Table 2 displays the serum levels of oxidative stress biomarkers in both groups. Significantly higher levels of MDA and homocysteine were observed in the IUGR group compared to the AGA group ($p < 0.05$). Conversely, SOD and catalase activities were significantly lower in the IUGR group ($p < 0.05$). IMA and NO levels did not show significant differences between the two groups ($p > 0.05$).

Table 3 presents the NRBC counts in the peripheral blood of neonates. A higher incidence of NRBCs was found in the IUGR group, suggesting increased fetal distress and hypoxia.

Discussion

The findings of this study corroborate the hypothesis that oxidative stress plays a significant role in the pathophysiology of IUGR. Elevated MDA levels indicate increased lipid peroxidation, a marker of cellular membrane damage due to ROS. The reduced activities of antioxidant enzymes SOD and catalase in the IUGR group suggest a compromised antioxidant defense system, rendering cells more susceptible to oxidative damage. Increased homocysteine levels have been associated with endothelial dysfunction and impaired placental blood flow, further contributing to fetal growth restriction.11-14

The presence of NRBCs in the peripheral blood of neonates is a well-established indicator of fetal hypoxia and distress. Their elevated counts in the IUGR group support the notion of placental insufficiency leading to compromised oxygen delivery to the fetus.15-17

Interestingly, IMA and NO levels did not differ significantly between the two groups. IMA is a marker of ischemia, and its levels can be influenced by various factors, including maternal health status and timing of sample collection. NO is a vasodilator involved in placental blood flow regulation; however, its levels may not always reflect oxidative stress accurately due to its short half-life and rapid metabolism.18-20

These results align with previous studies that have reported altered oxidative stress profiles in pregnancies complicated by IUGR. The identification of specific biomarkers associated with oxidative stress provides valuable insights into the mechanisms underlying IUGR and may aid in the development of diagnostic and therapeutic interventions.

Conclusion

This study highlights the significant role of oxidative stress in the pathophysiology of Intrauterine Growth Restriction. Elevated MDA and homocysteine levels, coupled with reduced antioxidant

enzyme activities, underscore the imbalance between ROS production and antioxidant defense mechanisms in IUGR. The presence of NRBCs further indicates fetal distress and compromised placental function. These findings suggest that oxidative stress biomarkers could serve as potential diagnostic tools for early identification of IUGR and provide targets for therapeutic strategies aimed at mitigating oxidative damage during pregnancy.

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