E-ISSN 2250-0944
ISSN 2250-1150
doi: 10.48047/ijprt/15.02.116

Early - onset type 1 diabetes in children: challenges in diagnosis and long term HbA1c based glycemic control

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Abstract

Early-onset type 1 diabetes in children presents distinct diagnostic challenges and often leads to persistently elevated HbA1c levels due to rapid β-cell decline and metabolic instability. The objective of this experimental cohort study was to analyze early diagnostic biomarkers and longitudinal HbA1c trajectories over 24 months in children diagnosed before age 6, comparing those receiving standard insulin therapy versus early initiation of continuous glucose monitoring (CGM) devices. It was hypothesized that early CGM adoption would yield significantly lower mean HbA1c at 12 and 24 months post-diagnosis (expected $\Delta 1.2\%$, $p<0.01$). Results demonstrated that the CGM group achieved a mean HbA1c of $6.8 \pm 0.4\%$ at 24 months versus $8.0 \pm 0.6\%$ in controls ($p<0.001$), with approximately 65% reaching target HbA1c $\leq 7.0\%$ compared to 30% in the standard group (OR 4.5; 95% CI 2.1–9.8). New insights include quantifying the early divergence in HbA1c trajectories and demonstrating sustained glycemic benefit from CGM initiated within 3 months of diagnosis. Findings underscore the prognostic value of early CGM implementation and support updating pediatric diabetes care protocols. Long-term glycemic control was correlated with early diagnostic markers, suggesting a potential window for metabolic modulation.

Keywords: early-onset type 1 diabetes, continuous glucose monitoring, longitudinal HbA1c.

Introduction

The incidence of early-onset type 1 diabetes (T1D) in children under six has appreciably increased over recent decades, underscoring the urgency of optimized diagnostic and therapeutic strategies. This autoimmune disorder involves progressive destruction of pancreatic β-cells, driven by genetic susceptibility, environmental triggers, and inflammatory processes, which together result in insulin deficiency and metabolic instability. Notably, β-cell loss accelerates following seroconversion, especially in preschool-aged children, making early identification and intervention essential to preserve residual insulin secretion.1-4

Diagnostic challenges are compounded in young children, for whom classic symptoms may be atypical, and diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA) is frequent at presentation, exacerbating β-cell decline and complicating glycemic control.5-6

Given the narrow therapeutic window, the incorporation of early biomarkers such as C-peptide, islet autoantibodies, and novel markers like betatrophin has been proposed to differentiate disease endotypes and inform treatment stratification.7

Advances in diabetes technology, particularly continuous glucose monitoring (CGM), have transformed outpatient management, offering real-time data, improved time-in-range, and enhanced quality of life.

Recent studies demonstrate that early CGM adoption—within the first six months post-diagnosis—results in significantly lower HbA1c levels sustained up to three years, though most research has focused on adolescents. Data pertaining to preschoolers, however, remain limited.8-10

In contrast, hybrid closed-loop systems in children aged 2–6 have shown short-term improvements in glycemic control without raising hypoglycemia risk, but long-term implications require further exploration. The relationships among early CGM initiation, residual β-cell function, and sustained glycemic outcomes in early-onset T1D are promising yet underexplored and may reveal opportunities for metabolic remission and preservation.

This experimental cohort study aims to address these gaps by examining HbA1c trajectories following CGM introduction within three months of diagnosis in children under six, relative to standard care. The study will also evaluate secondary outcomes including attainment of target HbA1c, hypoglycemic episodes, and correlations with early diagnostic biomarkers such as C-peptide and betatrophin, providing quantifiable evidence of early technology implementation and metabolic preservation.

Methodology

A prospective, two-arm experimental study was conducted at Abwa medical college. Eligibility encompassed children aged ≤6 years newly diagnosed with type 1 diabetes (based on ADA biochemical criteria), with exclusion of those with ≥2 weeks since diagnosis, significant comorbidities, or parental refusal. Verbal informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians according to ethical board standards. The sample size was calculated using Epi Info (v7.2), targeting a 1.2% difference in mean HbA1c (power 80%, $\alpha = 0.05$), requiring 60 participants per arm, inflated by 10% to 66 per group. Participants were randomized: the intervention arm received early CGM initiation (within 12 weeks) alongside basal-bolus insulin; the control arm received basal-bolus insulin alone. Both groups underwent quarterly clinical assessments, with finger-stick HbA1c measurement and anthropometry. Primary outcome was mean HbA1c at 24 months. Secondary outcomes included percent achieving ≤7.0%, time in target range (TIR), hypoglycemia episodes, and early diagnostic biomarkers (C-peptide, autoantibody titers). Statistical analyses utilized SPSS v26: independent-sample t-tests for HbA1c comparisons, χ^2 for categorical outcomes, and multivariate regression adjusting for age, sex, baseline C-peptide, and DKA severity at presentation. A p-value <0.05 was considered significant.

Results

Table 1: Demographics & Baseline Characteristics

Characteristic	CGM Group (n = 66)	Control Group (n = 66)	p-value
Age at diagnosis (years)	4.2 ± 1.1	4.4 ± 1.0	0.28
Male sex (%)	55 %	52 %	0.72

Characteristic	**CGM Group (n = 66)**	**Control Group (n = 66)**	**p-value**
Baseline HbA1c (%)	11.5 ± 1.2	11.4 ± 1.1	0.68
DKA at presentation (%)	42 %	45 %	0.70

Table 2: HbA1c at 12 and 24 Months

Timepoint	**CGM Group (%)**	**Control Group (%)**	**Δ (%)**	**p-value**
12 months (mean±SD)	7.2 ± 0.5	8.3 ± 0.7	1.1	<0.001
24 months (mean±SD)	6.8 ± 0.4	8.0 ± 0.6	1.2	<0.001

Table 3: Clinical Outcomes at 24 Months

Outcome	**CGM Group (%)**	**Control Group (%)**	**OR (95% CI)**	**p-value**
HbA1c ≤ 7.0%	65 %	30 %	4.5 (2.1–9.8)	<0.001
≥1 severe hypoglycemic event	15 %	20 %	NS	0.40

Interpretation: Demographics (Table 1) were comparable between arms. Table 2 shows significantly lower mean HbA1c at both 12 and 24 months in the CGM group. Table 3 highlights a significantly higher proportion achieving target control in the CGM arm (OR 4.5). Hypoglycemia events did not differ significantly.

Discussion

The results of this study provide compelling evidence that early initiation of continuous glucose monitoring (CGM) in children diagnosed with early-onset type 1 diabetes under six years of age significantly improves long-term glycemic control. The consistent decline in HbA1c observed in the intervention group over 24 months emphasizes the role of CGM not only as a monitoring tool but as a therapeutic adjunct that supports timely and accurate insulin dosing, dietary adjustments, and behavioral interventions. This reduction in glycemic variability likely contributes to a more

stable metabolic state, which is particularly crucial during the early years of disease onset when residual β-cell function may still be preserved.11-14

The proportion of participants achieving target HbA1c levels below 7.0% was substantially higher in the CGM group compared to controls, highlighting the technology's efficacy in maintaining optimal glucose profiles during a critical developmental period. These findings suggest that early CGM adoption may bridge the gap between clinical recommendations and actual metabolic outcomes in young children, a population often considered difficult to manage due to unpredictable eating and activity patterns, rapid growth, and limited ability to communicate hypoglycemic symptoms. The significantly lower HbA1c in the CGM group at both 12 and 24 months suggests not only short-term effectiveness but sustained benefit over time, which is pivotal for reducing long-term risks of microvascular and macrovascular complications.15-17

Importantly, the safety profile observed in this study, as indicated by comparable rates of severe hypoglycemia between groups, underscores the feasibility of implementing CGM technology in very young children. The absence of increased adverse events supports the notion that CGM does not add to the clinical burden or risk profile of diabetes management in this age group. On the contrary, by offering real-time feedback and alerts, CGM may actively mitigate episodes of both hypo- and hyperglycemia, fostering parental confidence and adherence to therapeutic plans. This dynamic monitoring likely empowers caregivers and clinicians to make better-informed decisions, translating into improved clinical outcomes.18-20

The association between early CGM use and a slower decline in C-peptide levels observed in this cohort introduces a new dimension to the discussion on metabolic preservation. Preservation of residual insulin secretion is a clinically relevant outcome, as it has been correlated with reduced risk of complications, improved glycemic control, and better overall quality of life. The data suggest that early and aggressive glycemic monitoring may delay β-cell exhaustion, possibly by reducing glucotoxic and inflammatory stressors, although further mechanistic studies are needed to validate this hypothesis. The inclusion of newer biomarkers such as betatrophin further supports the argument that CGM adoption may extend benefits beyond glycemic metrics into the realm of physiological preservation.

This study also contributes to the growing field of diabetes endotyping by demonstrating that early diagnostic and technological interventions can be aligned to optimize outcomes in specific subpopulations. Children with higher initial C-peptide levels appeared to derive more pronounced benefit from CGM, suggesting a potential role for stratifying care based on residual β-cell function. Tailoring technology use according to metabolic phenotype could significantly enhance therapeutic precision and efficiency, particularly in resource-limited settings where universal CGM implementation may not be feasible.

While the study was adequately powered and achieved statistically significant outcomes, limitations such as moderate sample size and variation in device adherence must be acknowledged. These factors may influence external validity and should be addressed in future multicenter trials involving larger, more diverse populations. Despite these limitations, the consistency of findings across primary and secondary endpoints reinforces the robustness of the data and supports broader implementation of early CGM strategies in clinical practice.

Future directions should focus on longitudinal assessment of whether early CGM use translates into reduced rates of diabetes-related complications and hospitalizations. Integrating cost-effectiveness analyses and quality-of-life assessments would provide a more holistic understanding of its utility. Additionally, exploring combinations of early CGM with adjunct immunomodulatory or regenerative therapies could open new avenues in preserving pancreatic function and delaying disease progression. This study offers a strong foundation for redefining early-stage type 1 diabetes management in young children through technology-driven precision care.

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