ISSN: 2181-4341, IMPACT FACTOR (RESEARCH BIB) – 7,245, SJIF – 5,431

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NEONATAL RESPIRATORY DISTRESS SYNDROME AND ITS PATHOMORPHOLOGICAL CHANGES

Abstract: Neonatal respiratory distress syndrome (RDS) is a life-threatening condition primarily affecting premature infants due to insufficient pulmonary surfactant production and immature lung development. This article explores the etiology, pathogenesis, and pathomorphological changes associated with neonatal RDS, including alveolar collapse, hyaline membrane formation, and vascular alterations. Current treatment strategies, such as exogenous surfactant therapy and mechanical ventilation, are discussed alongside preventive measures like antenatal corticosteroid administration. This study aims to provide neonatologists and pathologists with insights into the pathophysiology and clinical management of RDS, contributing to improved outcomes for affected neonates.

Introduction

Neonatal respiratory distress syndrome (RDS) is one of the most prevalent and critical conditions observed in preterm infants. The syndrome is characterized by insufficient surfactant production, which leads to alveolar instability and impaired gas exchange. The incidence of RDS increases with decreasing gestational age, affecting 60-80% of neonates born before 28 weeks of gestation. Despite advances in neonatal care, RDS remains a significant cause of morbidity and mortality among preterm infants.

Etiology and Pathogenesis

The primary cause of RDS is surfactant deficiency, which is produced by type II alveolar cells starting from the 24th to 28th week of gestation. Surfactant reduces surface tension in the alveoli, preventing collapse during exhalation. In preterm infants, immature alveoli lack sufficient surfactant, leading to atelectasis, hypoxemia, and hypercapnia.

The pathogenic sequence includes:

1. Atelectasis: Collapse of alveoli due to high surface tension.
2. Ventilation-perfusion mismatch: Impaired oxygenation and carbon dioxide removal.
3. Inflammatory response: Release of cytokines causing tissue damage.
4. Pulmonary hypertension: Increased vascular resistance exacerbates hypoxemia.

Pathomorphological Changes

Pathological findings in RDS reveal several hallmark changes in the lungs:

1. Alveolar Collapse

The absence of surfactant leads to alveolar instability, resulting in widespread atelectasis. Microscopically, the alveoli appear collapsed with reduced air content.

2. Hyaline Membrane Formation

One of the most characteristic features of RDS is the formation of hyaline membranes lining the alveoli. These membranes are composed of fibrin, necrotic epithelial cells, and plasma proteins, impairing gas exchange.

3. Vascular Changes

Capillaries in the lungs exhibit congestion, thrombosis, and endothelial damage, further aggravating pulmonary dysfunction.

4. Fibrotic Changes

Chronic cases of RDS may develop interstitial fibrosis and thickening of alveolar septa, reducing lung compliance and elasticity.

Clinical Manifestations

The clinical symptoms of RDS typically appear within the first hours of life and include:

Tachypnea (respiratory rate >60 breaths per minute),

Subcostal and intercostal retractions,

Nasal flaring and grunting,

Cyanosis due to hypoxemia.

Chest X-rays often show a "ground-glass" appearance, indicative of widespread atelectasis and hyaline membrane formation.

Treatment and Management

The management of RDS is centered on improving oxygenation and preventing alveolar collapse. The key approaches include:

1. Surfactant Replacement Therapy

Administration of exogenous surfactant via endotracheal tube improves alveolar stability and gas exchange.

2. Mechanical Ventilation

Continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) or high-frequency oscillatory ventilation (HFOV) helps maintain alveolar patency.

3. Oxygen Therapy

Supplemental oxygen is provided, but care is taken to avoid oxygen toxicity and retinopathy of prematurity (ROP).

4. Supportive Care

Includes maintaining normothermia, fluid balance, and monitoring for complications such as pneumothorax or infection.

Prevention

Preventive strategies focus on promoting fetal lung maturity in at-risk pregnancies:

Antenatal Corticosteroids: Administered to mothers at risk of preterm delivery to enhance surfactant production and lung compliance.

Avoidance of Preterm Birth: Measures to prolong gestation, such as tocolytics and infection management, can reduce the risk of RDS.

Conclusion

Neonatal respiratory distress syndrome remains a significant challenge in neonatal care. Understanding the pathophysiological mechanisms and pathomorphological changes is crucial for effective management and prevention. Advances in surfactant therapy and prenatal interventions have significantly improved outcomes, but continued research is needed to reduce the incidence and long-term complications of RDS

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