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Helicobacter pylori Infection in Iron Deficiency Anemia During Pregnancy

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Abstract:

Iron deficiency anemia (IDA) is one of the most common nutritional disorders during pregnancy and remains a major public health concern worldwide. It is associated with adverse maternal and fetal outcomes, including fatigue, increased risk of infection, preterm delivery, low birth weight, and impaired fetal neurodevelopment. While increased iron requirements and inadequate dietary intake are well-recognized causes of IDA in pregnancy, impaired iron absorption has gained increasing attention as a contributing factor. Helicobacter pylori infection is a highly prevalent chronic bacterial infection, particularly in developing countries. Several studies have suggested a potential link between H. pylori infection and iron deficiency anemia through mechanisms such as reduced gastric acid secretion, impaired iron absorption, competition for dietary iron, and chronic gastric inflammation leading to occult blood loss. During pregnancy, these effects may be amplified due to the increased iron demands and physiological changes affecting gastrointestinal function. Understanding the role of H. pylori infection in the pathogenesis of IDA during pregnancy is essential for improving diagnostic strategies and optimizing management.

Keywords: Helicobacter pylori; Iron deficiency anemia; Pregnancy; Maternal anemia; Iron absorption; Gastritis.

Introduction:

Iron deficiency anemia (IDA) remains the most prevalent micronutrient deficiency globally and is especially concerning during pregnancy due to its association with increased maternal and fetal morbidity. The World Health Organization estimates that up to 40% of pregnant women globally suffer from anemia, with iron deficiency being the leading cause (1).

Recent research has suggested that beyond nutritional factors, chronic infections may play a crucial role in the development and persistence of anemia. Among these infections, Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori), a Gram-negative bacterium known for its role in peptic ulcer disease and gastric cancer, has gained attention as a possible contributor to iron deficiency anemia (2).

Overview of *Helicobacter pylori* Infection

H. pylori is a spiral-shaped, flagellated bacterium that colonizes the gastric mucosa. It is estimated that over half of the world's population is infected, particularly in developing countries where infection often begins in early childhood. Once established, *H. pylori* causes chronic gastritis and may progress to peptic ulcer disease or gastric carcinoma. The bacterium is highly adapted to the acidic gastric environment and possesses virulence factors such as urease, cytotoxin-associated gene A (CagA), and vacuolating cytotoxin A (VacA), which enable it to decrease the immune response and persist for years (3).

The clinical manifestations of *H. pylori* infection range from asymptomatic gastritis to severe ulcerative disease. In pregnant women, overt symptoms may be masked or attributed to normal gestational changes such as nausea or dyspepsia, leading to underdiagnosis. Increasing evidence, points toward a significant impact of *H. pylori*, particularly its role in iron metabolism (4).

Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain how *H. pylori* infection contributes to iron deficiency and anemia.

One of the primary pathways is through reduced iron absorption. Chronic *H. pylori* gastritis can lead to hypochlorhydria or achlorhydria, which impairs the solubility and reduction of ferric iron to the ferrous form which is required for iron absorption in the duodenum. This gastric dysfunction compromises iron bioavailability even in the presence of adequate dietary intake (5).

Secondly, *H. pylori* directly competes with the host for iron. The bacterium expresses multiple iron-binding proteins and transport systems, allowing it to sequester iron from host tissues for its metabolic needs. In iron-limited environments, *H. pylori* upregulates these systems, exacerbating the deficiency in the host (6).

Thirdly, chronic inflammation induced by *H. pylori* stimulates the hepatic production of hepcidin, a peptide hormone that negatively regulates iron absorption and promotes iron sequestration in macrophages. Elevated hepcidin levels result in functional iron deficiency, where iron is present but inaccessible for erythropoiesis (7).

Lastly, *H. pylori*-associated gastric microbleeding from mucosal erosion or ulceration may contribute to chronic blood loss and iron depletion, especially in women with coexisting nutritional deficiencies or heavy menstrual losses (8).

Evidence from Clinical and Epidemiological Studies

Numerous observational and case-control studies have documented an association between *H. pylori* infection and iron deficiency anemia, including among pregnant women. In a study conducted in Egypt, pregnant women infected with *H. pylori* had significantly lower serum ferritin and hemoglobin levels compared to non-infected counterparts, even after controlling for dietary iron intake. Similar findings have been replicated in studies from Iran, India, and Brazil, suggesting a global trend (9),

Meta-analyses have further strengthened this association. A meta-analysis found that *H. pylori* infection was significantly associated with an increased risk of iron deficiency anemia (OR: 2.8; 95% CI: 1.9–4.2). Subgroup analysis confirmed that pregnant women represented a particularly vulnerable group. More recently, a 2019 systematic review cemphasized that eradication of *H. pylori* in infected women led to significant improvements in hemoglobin and ferritin levels (6).

However, some studies have reported conflicting results, and not all infected individuals develop anemia. These discrepancies may be attributed to differences in *H. pylori* strains, host genetic susceptibility, nutritional status, and socioeconomic factors. For example, the presence of CagA-positive strains has been more strongly associated with iron depletion than CagA-negative strains. These variations increase the need for further targeted research (4).

Diagnostic and Therapeutic Considerations During Pregnancy

The diagnosis of *H. pylori* infection during pregnancy poses unique challenges. Invasive tests such as endoscopy and biopsy are typically avoided due to safety concerns. Non-invasive tests such as the urea breath test, stool antigen test, and serology are alternatives, though each has limitations. The urea breath test, while highly sensitive and specific, requires the ingestion of labeled urea and is not routinely recommended in pregnancy. Serological tests cannot distinguish between active and past infections, whereas stool antigen tests may be more appropriate and accurate during gestation (5).

Treatment of *H. pylori* infection in pregnancy must consider the safety of antibiotics and potential fetal risks. The standard triple therapy—typically including a proton pump inhibitor, clarithromycin, and amoxicillin or metronidazole—is not routinely administered during pregnancy unless symptoms are severe or complications

arise. Consequently, many clinicians defer eradication therapy until after delivery. This delay, however, may increases iron deficiency, necessitating a careful balance between maternal health and fetal safety (3).

In terms of iron supplementation, infected women may show suboptimal response to oral iron therapy, likely due to impaired absorption and ongoing iron competition. In such cases, parenteral iron may be a more effective alternative. Furthermore, screening for *H. pylori* in cases of unexplained or refractory IDA during pregnancy could enhance management strategies, though guidelines remain inconsistent on this practice (9).

Public Health Implications

The intersection of *H. pylori* infection and iron deficiency anemia during pregnancy represents an important but under-recognized public health concern, particularly in resource-limited settings. Both conditions are highly prevalent and frequently co-exist in regions with poor sanitation, limited healthcare access, and high rates of malnutrition. Integrating *H. pylori* screening into maternal health programs, particularly for women presenting with unexplained anemia, could provide a cost-effective strategy to improve maternal and neonatal outcomes (8).

Furthermore, improving water quality, promoting hygienic practices, and enhancing nutritional education are crucial in preventing both *H. pylori* transmission and iron deficiency. Health workers should also be trained to consider chronic infections as contributing factors when managing anemia during pregnancy (10).

Future Directions for Research

While the association between *H. pylori* and iron deficiency anemia is increasingly recognized, several gaps remain in our understanding. Longitudinal studies are needed to establish causality, assess the effectiveness of *H. pylori* eradication in improving anemia during pregnancy, and evaluate the long-term impact on maternal and fetal health. Research should also explore the interaction between *H. pylori* virulence factors and host immune responses in determining susceptibility to anemia (9).

The development of safe and effective eradication regimens for use during pregnancy would be a major advancement. Additionally, identifying reliable, non-invasive diagnostic tools tailored for pregnant women would facilitate early detection and management of *H. pylori* infection (6).

Iron deficiency anemia in pregnancy remains a significant global health issue, and chronic *H. pylori* infection may play a key role in its pathogenesis. Through mechanisms involving impaired iron absorption, direct bacterial competition, inflammatory cytokine release, and mucosal blood loss, *H. pylori* contributes to both absolute and functional iron deficiency. Clinical and epidemiological evidence supports a strong association between *H. pylori* infection and anemia during pregnancy, though more robust, longitudinal data are needed (7).

Healthcare providers should maintain a high index of suspicion for *H. pylori* infection in cases of refractory or unexplained iron deficiency anemia, particularly in endemic areas. While treatment during pregnancy is currently limited, early diagnosis and targeted management strategies—including parenteral iron and postpartum eradication therapy—can mitigate the impact of this infection on maternal and fetal outcomes. Addressing *H. pylori* as a modifiable risk factor for anemia could significantly improve the quality of prenatal care and reduce the burden of maternal anemia worldwide (5).

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