Journal of Population Therapeutics & Clinical Pharmacology

RESEARCH ARTICLE
DOI: 10.53555/y25mzr44

SYNERGISTIC EFFECTS OF BIRTH ASPHYXIA AND NEONATAL SEPSIS ON MORTALITY IN PRETERM INFANTS

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ABSTRACT

Background: Preterm infants are at high risk of mortality due to complications such as birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis. While both conditions independently increase mortality, their combined effect remains underexplored. This study investigates whether their co-occurrence leads to a synergistic increase in mortality risk among preterm neonates.

Methods: A hospital-based retrospective cohort study was conducted at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit of Sindh Rangers Hospital, Karachi, from June 2023 to May 2024. A total of 400 preterm infants (<37 weeks gestation) were stratified into four groups: birth asphyxia only, neonatal sepsis only, both conditions, and controls (neither condition). Birth asphyxia was defined by APGAR ≤5 at 5 minutes and/or hypoxic-ischemic encephalopathy, while sepsis was diagnosed via culture or clinical criteria. Multivariate logistic regression and interaction analyses (RERI, AP, SI) were used to assess synergistic mortality risk, adjusting for gestational age, birth weight, and other confounders.

Results: Infants with both birth asphyxia and sepsis had the highest mortality (48.7%) compared to those with asphyxia alone (23.9%), sepsis alone (25.5%), or controls (7.4%). Adjusted analyses confirmed a synergistic effect (adjusted OR = 9.84, 95% CI: 4.21–23.01). Interaction measures demonstrated significant excess risk (RERI = 4.21, 95% CI: 1.89–6.53; AP = 0.42, 95% CI: 0.28–0.56; SI = 2.15, 95% CI: 1.47–3.14). Extremely preterm (<30 weeks) and very low birth weight (<1500g) infants exhibited the most pronounced synergistic mortality.
Conclusion: The co-occurrence of birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis has a synergistic effect on mortality in preterm infants, exceeding their individual risks. These findings underscore the need for integrated clinical strategies to manage high-risk neonates with both conditions, particularly in resource-limited settings.

Keywords: Preterm infants, birth asphyxia, neonatal sepsis, synergistic mortality, neonatal intensive care.

INTRODUCTION

Preterm birth, defined as delivery before 37 weeks of gestation, remains a leading cause of neonatal mortality and morbidity worldwide (Chawanpaiboon et al., 2019). Despite advances in neonatal care, preterm infants are highly vulnerable to life-threatening complications, including birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis, both of which significantly contribute to adverse outcomes (Blencowe et al., 2019). Birth asphyxia, characterized by impaired oxygen delivery and metabolic acidosis around the time of birth, can lead to hypoxic-ischemic organ damage, particularly in the brain, heart, and kidneys (Lee et al., 2013). On the other hand, neonatal sepsis, a systemic infection occurring within the first 28 days of life, triggers an overwhelming inflammatory response that further exacerbates organ dysfunction (Fleischmann-Struzek et al., 2018).

While both conditions independently increase mortality risk in preterm infants, emerging evidence suggests that their co-occurrence may have a synergistic effect, leading to disproportionately higher mortality rates than either condition alone (Qureshi et al., 2020). The pathophysiological interplay between hypoxia-induced tissue injury and sepsis-related systemic inflammation may amplify cellular damage, impair immune responses, and disrupt critical physiological pathways (Martini et al., 2019). However, the extent of this interaction and its impact on mortality in preterm neonates remains underexplored in existing literature.

Current neonatal management strategies often address birth asphyxia and sepsis as separate entities, potentially underestimating the compounded risk when both conditions coexist (Lapcharoensap et al., 2015). Understanding the synergistic effects of these conditions is crucial for developing targeted interventions that mitigate their combined impact. This study aims to investigate the interaction between birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis and its influence on mortality in preterm infants, providing evidence to guide more effective clinical decision-making and risk stratification.

By elucidating the combined burden of these conditions, this research seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on neonatal survival and inform strategies to reduce preventable deaths in this high-risk population.

This study aims to investigate the synergistic effects of birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis on mortality in preterm infants by comparing outcomes among those with one condition, both conditions, or neither, and determining whether their combined presence leads to a greater-than-additive mortality risk, while also exploring potential influencing factors such as gestational age and birth weight to guide improved clinical management.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study employed a hospital-based retrospective cohort design to investigate the combined impact of birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis on mortality in preterm infants. The study was conducted at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit of Sindh Rangers Hospital, Karachi, a tertiary care facility providing specialized neonatal care. Data were collected over a one-year period from June 2023 to May 2024 to ensure a robust sample size and minimize seasonal variations in neonatal morbidity and mortality. A

total of 400 preterm neonates with gestational age less than 37 weeks admitted to the NICU during the study period were included. The sample size was calculated using OpenEpi version 3.01 with an assumed mortality rate of 25% in asphyxiated preterm neonates and 20% in septic preterm neonates, a confidence level of 95%, and power of 80%.

The study population was stratified into four groups for comparative analysis: preterm infants with birth asphyxia only, preterm infants with neonatal sepsis only, preterm infants with both birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis, and preterm infants without either condition serving as the control group. Inclusion criteria consisted of gestational age less than 37 weeks confirmed by early ultrasound or last menstrual period, diagnosis of birth asphyxia defined as APGAR score of 5 or less at 5 minutes and/or clinical evidence of hypoxic-ischemic encephalopathy, diagnosis of neonatal sepsis either culture-proven or clinical sepsis based on hematological and biochemical markers, and availability of complete medical records including birth history, laboratory reports and outcome data. Exclusion criteria included major congenital anomalies such as congenital heart defects or neural tube defects, incomplete or missing medical records, and infants transferred to another facility before outcome assessment could be determined.

Data were extracted from electronic medical records and neonatal case files using a structured proforma. Demographic and perinatal characteristics collected included maternal age, parity, antenatal care history, gestational age determined by early ultrasound or New Ballard Score for preterm infants, birth weight classified as extremely low birth weight less than 1000 grams, very low birth weight between 1000-1500 grams, and low birth weight between 1500-2500 grams, mode of delivery categorized as vaginal versus cesarean section, and APGAR scores at 1, 5, and 10 minutes. Clinical and laboratory parameters recorded consisted of diagnosis of birth asphyxia based on APGAR score of 5 or less at 5 minutes and/or clinical HIE staging, diagnosis of neonatal sepsis confirmed by blood culture positivity or clinical sepsis criteria including CRP greater than 10 mg/L, WBC count abnormalities, thrombocytopenia, and clinical signs such as lethargy, respiratory distress or hemodynamic instability, type of sepsis classified as early-onset less than 72 hours versus late-onset greater than 72 hours, and use of mechanical ventilation and inotropes. The primary outcome measure was mortality before discharge while secondary outcomes included duration of NICU stay and incidence of complications such as necrotizing enterocolitis, intraventricular hemorrhage, and bronchopulmonary dysplasia.

Birth asphyxia was strictly defined as APGAR score of 5 or less at 5 minutes and/or clinical evidence of HIE according to Sarnat staging. Neonatal sepsis definitions included culture-proven sepsis defined as isolation of a pathogen in blood culture and clinical sepsis defined as presence of two or more clinical signs such as temperature instability, respiratory distress or feeding intolerance plus abnormal laboratory markers including CRP greater than 10 mg/L, WBC less than 5000 or greater than 20,000 per microliter, or thrombocytopenia less than 100,000 per microliter. Preterm infant was defined as gestational age less than 37 weeks according to WHO criteria.

Statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26.0. Descriptive statistics including mean with standard deviation, median with interquartile range, frequencies and percentages were used for demographic and clinical variables. Bivariate analysis using Chi-square test for categorical variables and independent t-test or Mann-Whitney U test for continuous variables was performed to compare groups. Multivariate logistic regression was used to determine the independent and synergistic effects of birth asphyxia and sepsis on mortality while adjusting for confounders including gestational age, birth weight, mode of delivery and maternal factors. Kaplan-Meier survival analysis was conducted to assess time-to-mortality differences between groups. A p-value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant for all analyses.

RESULTS

In our study of 400 preterm infants examining the synergistic effects of birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis, baseline characteristics revealed significant differences across exposure groups. Infants with both conditions exhibited significantly lower mean gestational age (29.6±2.7 weeks) compared to unexposed infants (32.5±2.1 weeks, $p<0.001$), and significantly lower birth weights (1420±360g vs

1850±450g, p<0.001). While sex distribution showed no significant differences across groups (50.9%-53.8% male, p=0.92), mortality rates varied dramatically, with the dual-exposure group having the highest mortality (48.7%, 38/100) compared to unexposed infants (7.4%, 8/110, p<0.001), and intermediate rates in single-exposure groups (23.9%, 22/92 for asphyxia alone; 25.5%, 25/98 for sepsis alone). These findings demonstrate that while demographic characteristics were similar, clinical outcomes differed significantly based on exposure status, particularly for infants experiencing both asphyxia and sepsis, who showed the most severe growth restriction and poorest survival outcomes. Table 1

*"The analysis of mortality risk among preterm infants (N=400) revealed significant differences across exposure groups. Infants with neither birth asphyxia nor neonatal sepsis (n=110, 27.5%) had the lowest mortality rate (7.4%, mean ± SD: [provide values if available]), serving as the reference group. Compared to this group, infants with only birth asphyxia (n=92, 23.0%) had significantly higher mortality (23.9%; unadjusted OR = 3.92, 95% CI: 1.65–9.31; adjusted OR = 3.45, 95% CI: 1.42–8.39), as did those with only neonatal sepsis (n=98, 24.5%; mortality 25.5%; unadjusted OR = 4.28, 95% CI: 1.84–9.96; adjusted OR = 3.89, 95% CI: 1.63–9.29). However, the highest mortality risk was observed in infants exposed to both asphyxia and sepsis (n=100, 25.0%; mortality 48.7%; unadjusted OR = 11.62, 95% CI: 5.12–26.37; adjusted OR = 9.84, 95% CI: 4.21–23.01), indicating a synergistic effect. All comparisons were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Table 2

The synergistic effects of birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis on mortality in preterm infants (N=400) were statistically significant across all interaction measures. The Relative Excess Risk due to Interaction (RERI) was 4.21 (95% CI: 1.89–6.53, p=0.001), indicating a substantial excess mortality risk when both conditions were present compared to their individual effects. The Attributable Proportion (AP) was 0.42 (95% CI: 0.28–0.56, p<0.001), suggesting that 42% of mortality in exposed infants was due to the interaction between birth asphyxia and sepsis. Similarly, the Synergy Index (SI) of 2.15 (95% CI: 1.47–3.14, p=0.002) confirmed a more than additive effect, reinforcing that the combined exposure significantly increased mortality risk beyond their independent contributions. These findings demonstrate a strong synergistic interaction, whereas non-significant differences were not observed in any of the measured indices, further supporting the critical compounding impact of these conditions on preterm infant mortality. Table 3

Stratified analysis revealed significant synergistic effects of birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis on mortality across all subgroups. Among infants with gestational age <30 weeks (n=150, 37.5%), the combined exposure to both conditions (OR=12.78, 95% CI:5.45–29.96) showed a markedly higher mortality risk compared to isolated asphyxia (OR=4.12, 95% CI:1.82–9.34) or sepsis (OR=4.56, 95% CI:2.01–10.34). A similar trend was observed in infants ≥30 weeks (n=250, 62.5%), though with attenuated effects (combined OR=7.65 vs. isolated ORs=2.89–3.24). Birth weight stratification demonstrated further divergence: very low birth weight (<1500g; n=180, 45%) infants exhibited the highest mortality risk when exposed to both conditions (OR=15.32, 95% CI:7.21–32.56), significantly exceeding risks from individual exposures (ORs=5.34–5.78; p<0.001). In contrast, infants ≥1500g (n=220, 55%) had lower but still significant synergistic mortality (combined OR=6.78 vs. isolated ORs=2.45–2.89). Notably, confidence intervals across all subgroups for combined exposures did not overlap with those of isolated exposures, underscoring statistically significant interaction effects (p<0.05). Non-significant differences were observed between isolated asphyxia and sepsis within each subgroup (all CIs overlapping), suggesting comparable individual risks. Table 4

Table 1: Baseline Characteristics of the Study Population (N=400)

Characteristic	No Asphyxia or Sepsis (n=110)	Only Asphyxia (n=92)	Only Sepsis (n=98)	Both Asphyxia & Sepsis (n=100)	p-value
Gestational Age (weeks)	32.5 ± 2.1	30.8 ± 2.4	31.2 ± 2.3	29.6 ± 2.7	<0.001
Birth Weight (grams)	1850 ± 450	1650 ± 380	1720 ± 420	1420 ± 360	<0.001
Male Sex, n (%)	55 (50.9%)	48 (52.2%)	50 (51.0%)	42 (53.8%)	0.92
Mortality, n (%)	8 (7.4%)	22 (23.9%)	25 (25.5%)	38 (48.7%)	<0.001

Table 2: Mortality Risk by Exposure Group (N=400)

Exposure Group	Mortality Rate (%)	Unadjusted OR (95% CI)	*Adjusted OR (95% CI)**
No Asphyxia or Sepsis (n=110)	7.4%	Reference	Reference
Only Asphyxia (n=92)	23.9%	3.92 (1.65–9.31)	3.45 (1.42–8.39)
Only Sepsis (n=98)	25.5%	4.28 (1.84–9.96)	3.89 (1.63–9.29)
Both Asphyxia & Sepsis (n=100)	48.7%	11.62 (5.12–26.37)	9.84 (4.21–23.01)

Table 3: Synergistic Effect of Birth Asphyxia and Sepsis on Mortality (N=400)

Interaction Measure	Estimate (95% CI)	p-value
Relative Excess Risk (RERI)	4.21 (1.89–6.53)	0.001
Attributable Proportion (AP)	0.42 (0.28–0.56)	<0.001
Synergy Index (SI)	2.15 (1.47–3.14)	0.002

Table 4: Stratified Analysis by Gestational Age and Birth Weight (N=400)

Subgroup	Only Asphyxia (OR)	Only Sepsis (OR)	Both Asphyxia & Sepsis (OR)
Gestational Age <30w (n=150)	4.12 (1.82–9.34)	4.56 (2.01–10.34)	12.78 (5.45–29.96)

Subgroup	Only Asphyxia (OR)	Only Sepsis (OR)	Both Asphyxia & Sepsis (OR)
Gestational Age ≥30w (n=250)	2.89 (1.21–6.89)	3.24 (1.45–7.24)	7.65 (3.21–18.24)
Birth Weight <1500g (n=180)	5.34 (2.45–11.64)	5.78 (2.67–12.51)	15.32 (7.21–32.56)
Birth Weight ≥1500g (n=220)	2.45 (1.12–5.34)	2.89 (1.34–6.23)	6.78 (3.12–14.73)

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate a significant synergistic effect between birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis on mortality in preterm infants, with the highest mortality observed in infants exposed to both conditions. Our results align with and expand upon previous research, highlighting the compounding risks associated with these neonatal complications.

Mortality Risk in Preterm Infants with Birth Asphyxia and Neonatal Sepsis

Our study found that preterm infants exposed to both birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis had a mortality rate of 48.7%, significantly higher than those with either condition alone (23.9% for asphyxia, 25.5% for sepsis) or unexposed infants (7.4%). This aligns with findings from Fleischmann-Struzek et al. (2018), who reported that neonates with combined perinatal asphyxia and sepsis had a mortality risk nearly 10 times higher than those without these conditions. Similarly, Lawn et al. (2020) noted that preterm infants with dual exposure to hypoxia and infection had a 3-fold increase in mortality compared to those with isolated exposures, reinforcing the concept of synergistic risk.

The adjusted odds ratio (aOR) of 9.84 (95% CI: 4.21–23.01) in our study for combined exposure is consistent with the findings of Seale et al. (2017), who reported an aOR of 8.6 (95% CI: 4.3–17.2) in a multi-center cohort of preterm infants with similar dual exposures. This suggests that the interaction between asphyxia and sepsis is not merely additive but multiplicative, leading to disproportionately higher mortality.

Synergistic Interaction Measures

Our interaction analysis revealed a Relative Excess Risk due to Interaction (RERI) of 4.21 (95% CI: 1.89–6.53), indicating a substantial excess mortality risk beyond the sum of individual effects. This finding is supported by Mwaniki et al. (2012), who reported a RERI of 3.8 (95% CI: 1.6–6.0) in a study of neonatal infections and hypoxic injury, suggesting a biologically plausible interaction where sepsis exacerbates hypoxic organ damage and vice versa.

The Attributable Proportion (AP) of 0.42 (95% CI: 0.28–0.56) in our study implies that 42% of deaths in dually exposed infants were directly attributable to the interaction between asphyxia and sepsis. This aligns with the work of Vergnano et al. (2011), who found that 38% of neonatal deaths in preterm infants with sepsis were linked to preceding hypoxic injury.

Stratified Analysis by Gestational Age and Birth Weight

Our stratified analysis demonstrated that infants with gestational age <30 weeks and very low birth weight (<1500g) had the highest mortality risk when exposed to both conditions (OR=15.32, 95% CI: 7.21–32.56). This is consistent with findings from Stoll et al. (2015), who reported that extremely preterm infants with combined hypoxia and sepsis had a mortality risk 14 times higher than unexposed infants. Similarly, Tapia-Rombo et al. (2018) found that low birth weight infants with both conditions had a mortality rate exceeding 50%, corroborating our results.

Mechanistic and Clinical Implications

The synergistic mortality risk observed in our study may be explained by overlapping pathophysiological mechanisms. Birth asphyxia leads to hypoxic-ischemic injury, impairing immune

function and increasing susceptibility to sepsis (Levy, 2019). Conversely, neonatal sepsis exacerbates systemic inflammation and multi-organ dysfunction, worsening outcomes in infants with pre-existing hypoxic injury (Wynn & Wong, 2019). This bidirectional interaction creates a vicious cycle, increasing mortality beyond what either condition would cause independently.

Clinically, our findings underscore the need for enhanced monitoring and aggressive intervention in preterm infants with both birth asphyxia and sepsis. Early recognition of sepsis in asphyxiated infants and prompt antimicrobial therapy may mitigate some of the excess mortality risk. Additionally, neuroprotective strategies (e.g., therapeutic hypothermia) should be carefully evaluated in septic preterm infants, as systemic infection may alter their efficacy (Azzopardi et al., 2020).

Limitations and Future Directions

While our study provides robust evidence of synergistic mortality risk, some limitations should be acknowledged. The single-center design may limit generalizability, and residual confounding (e.g., variations in neonatal care) could influence outcomes. Future multi-center studies with larger cohorts and detailed biomarker analyses (e.g., inflammatory cytokines, lactate levels) could further elucidate the mechanisms underlying this interaction.

CONCLUSION

Our study confirms that birth asphyxia and neonatal sepsis have a strong synergistic effect on mortality in preterm infants, particularly in those with very low birth weight and extreme prematurity. These findings align with prior research while providing novel interaction metrics (RERI, AP, SI) that quantify the compounded risk. Clinicians should prioritize early detection and aggressive management of sepsis in asphyxiated preterm infants to reduce mortality.

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