Short and long term outcomes following partial exchange transfusion in the polycythaemic newborn: a systematic review

E M Dempsey, K Barrington

Background: Severe polycythaemia in the neonate may produce symptoms due to hyperviscosity and may be associated with serious complications. Partial exchange transfusion will reduce the packed cell volume.

Objective: To determine whether partial exchange transfusion in term infants with polycythaemia (symptomatic and asymptomatic) is associated with improved short and long term outcomes.

Search strategy: Medline, EMBASE, and the Cochrane Controlled Trials Register of the Cochrane Library were searched. The following keywords were used: polycythaemia, partial exchange transfusion, hyperviscosity, and limited to the newborn. This covered years 1966–2004. Abstracts of the Pediatric Academic Societies and personal files were also searched.

Selection criteria: Randomised or quasi-randomised trials in term infants with polycythaemia and/or documented hyperviscosity were considered. Clinically relevant outcomes included short term (resolution of symptoms, neurobehavioural assessment scores, major complications) and long term neurodevelopmental outcome.

Data collection and analysis: All data for each study were extracted, assessed, and coded separately. Any disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Main results: Six studies were identified; five had data that could be evaluated for analysis. There is no evidence of an improvement in long term neurological outcome (mental developmental index, incidence of mental delay, and incidence of neurological diagnoses) after partial exchange transfusion in symptomatic or asymptomatic infants. There is no evidence of improvement in early neurobehavioural assessment scores (Brazelton neonatal behavioural assessment scale). Partial exchange transfusion may be associated with an earlier improvement in symptoms, but there are insufficient data to calculate the size of the effect. Necrotising enterocolitis is probably increased by partial exchange transfusion (relative risk 8.68, 95% confidence interval 1.06 to 71.1).

Conclusion: There is no evidence of long term benefit from partial exchange in polycythaemic infants, and the incidence of gastrointestinal injury is increased. The long term outcome is more likely to be related to the underlying cause of polycythaemia.

Polycythaemia occurs in 2–5% of term newborns, usually as a compensatory mechanism secondary to intrauterine fetal hypoxia, or sometimes as a result of delayed cord clamping. It leads to hyperviscosity, which can result in impaired end organ perfusion; this can manifest as neurological, cardiorespiratory, gastrointestinal, and metabolic symptoms. These symptoms are generally transient and may be minor despite severe degrees of polycythaemia. Although serious complications such as renal vein thrombosis or cerebral venous sinus thrombosis have been described in infants with polycythaemia, these are rare, and the principle clinical concern is that polycythaemia may be associated with adverse long term neurological sequelae.

Partial exchange transfusion (PET) has been used as a therapeutic modality to reduce packed cell volume and thereby blood viscosity while at the same time maintaining intravascular volume. Observational studies suggest that symptomatic infants who undergo PET may have an improvement in symptoms; however, the symptoms are in any case transient. More importantly, it is also unclear if PET is associated with improved long term neurological outcome. The objective of this systematic review was to assess the efficacy and safety of PET in the treatment of the polycythaemic newborn.

METHODS

Criteria for inclusion

Studies were included if they were randomised or quasi-randomised clinical trials, if the participants were newborn with documented central polycythaemia (defined as a central packed cell volume greater than or equal to 64%), and if the interventions consisted of a PET designed to reduce central packed cell volume to 60% or less, compared with observation only.

Outcome measures

(1) Long term neurodevelopmental, expressed as the proportion of infants with a neurological diagnosis, developmental delay, and/or motor abnormalities at 18 months or older. Alternatively, evaluation of cognitive or motor development using a validated continuous scale was acceptable.

(2) Short term neurological assessed by neurobehavioural assessment scores.

Abbreviations: BNBAS, Brazelton neonatal behaviour assessment scale; NEC, necrotising enterocolitis; PET, partial exchange transfusion
### Table 1 Description of included studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Gestation</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Symptomatic/asymptomatic</th>
<th>Packed cell volume</th>
<th>Planned reduction</th>
<th>Mode of exchange</th>
<th>Short term follow up assessment</th>
<th>Long term follow up assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Van der Elst et al</td>
<td>Not clearly stated</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>No distinction made between symptomatic/asymptomatic</td>
<td>PCV of 65%</td>
<td>PCV to &lt;60%</td>
<td>Umbilical vein catheter. FFP</td>
<td>BNBAS and neurological assessment of Prechtl at 10 days</td>
<td>Neurological, developmental assessment at 8 months (similar to the Griffith development score)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldberg et al</td>
<td>Not clearly stated</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>No distinction made between symptomatic and asymptomatic</td>
<td>Venous PCV &gt;64% and hyperviscous. Antecubital vein</td>
<td>PCV to 50%</td>
<td>Umbilical vein catheter. FFP</td>
<td>BNBAS at 8 h, 24 h, 72 h, and 2 weeks</td>
<td>BSBID and neurological assessment at 8 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black et al</td>
<td>“Term”</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>No distinction made between symptomatic and asymptomatic</td>
<td>Venous PCV 65% and hyperviscous. Antecubital vein</td>
<td>PCV to 50%</td>
<td>Umbilical vein catheter. FFP</td>
<td>Neonatal symptoms</td>
<td>BSBID and neurological assessment at 1 and 2 years. Slosson IQ and WRAT test at 7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bada et al</td>
<td>Not clearly stated</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Only asymptomatic patients were randomised</td>
<td>Radial artery PCV &gt;63%</td>
<td>PCV to 55%</td>
<td>Route not stated. Pharmamute</td>
<td>Cerebral artery Doppler measurements</td>
<td>BSBID or Stanford Binet and neurological assessment at 30 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratrasawadi et al</td>
<td>Not clearly stated</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>Only asymptomatic patients were randomised</td>
<td>Central venous PCV 65% or more</td>
<td>PCV to 60%</td>
<td>Route not stated.</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Gasonal development at 1.5–2 years</td>
</tr>
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</table>

PCV, Packed cell volume; BNBAS, Brazelton neonatal behavioural assessment scale; BSID, Bayley scales of infant development; WRAT, wide range achievement test.

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**RESULTS**

We identified a total of five randomised controlled trials of partial exchange transfusion in newborns with polycythaemia or hyperviscosity. Three studies10–12 present data on short term neurobehavioural outcome assessed by the Brazelton neonatal behaviour assessment scale. Three studies10–12 present data on short term neurobehavioural outcome assessed by the Brazelton neonatal behaviour assessment scale. Three studies10–12 present data on short term neurobehavioural outcome assessed by the Brazelton neonatal behaviour assessment scale. Three studies10–12 present data on short term neurobehavioural outcome assessed by the Brazelton neonatal behaviour assessment scale.

**Analysis of outcomes**

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**Long term follow up assessment**

For dichotomous outcomes, we calculated a relative risk (RR) and 95% confidence interval (CI). For continuous variables, we evaluated using the I² statistic.
assessment scale (BNBAS) and the Prechtl scale. Van der Elst et al. found no difference between exchanged and observed groups in BNBAS and Prechtl scores at 10 days. Goldberg et al. found a significant decrease in abnormalities initially present on BNBAS assessment when re-examined at two weeks only in the exchanged patients. Black et al. noted that clinical manifestations in the symptomatic polycythaemia group resolved (87%) or became less severe (13%) after PET, and Black et al. noted that gastrointestinal symptoms were common after PET. There are inadequate firm data to reach a conclusion.

**Short term symptoms**
Most infants in these studies are asymptomatic. Van der Elst et al. presented data on clinical signs and noted that peripheral cyanosis improved in all six patients, five after PET and one spontaneously in the observation group. Bada et al. noted that clinical manifestations in the symptomatic polycythaemia group resolved (87%) or became less severe (13%) after PET, and Black et al. noted that gastrointestinal symptoms were common after PET. There are inadequate firm data to reach a conclusion.

**Adverse events**
Van der Elst et al. noted that one of 24 patients developed necrotising enterocolitis (NEC) 24 hours after PET and required surgery. None of the 25 control patients developed NEC. There were no deaths. Black et al. noted the onset of gastrointestinal symptoms in 42% of patients after PET and in only 2% of the controls. They noted in a separate publication that eight of the 43 infants who had PET (and none of the 50 controls) developed typical NEC with pneumonia and clinical symptoms. No adverse events were recorded in the studies of Goldberg et al., Bada et al., and Ratrisawadi et al.. The RR for the development of NEC is 8.68 (95% CI 1.06 to 71.1).

**DISCUSSION**
The current standard neonatal practice for performing a PET is (a) symptomatic with a packed cell volume of 65% or more or (b) asymptomatic with a packed cell volume of 70% or more. The Committee of the Fetus and Newborn of the American Academy of Pediatrics does not issue any definitive guidelines, stating that the accepted treatment of polycythaemia is PET. We identified five randomised trials of PET in polycythaemic newborns. The studies have small numbers of patients, use various definitions of polycythaemia based on packed cell volume, and have various follow up times. Only two studies evaluated the efficacy of PET in asymptomatic patients, both using a packed cell volume of 65% or more.

There are no randomised trials of PET in only symptomatic patients, which reduces the power of this review to determine the effects of PET in such infants. This lack of information is not surprising as there is a tendency to treat all asymptomatic patients with PET, probably because of published recommendations. However, there appears to be no clear evidence that the long term outcome of polycythaemic infants is worse in symptomatic patients, compared with those who were asymptomatic. Bada et al. evaluated the long term outcome of the 10 non-randomised symptomatic infants in their study, which do not appear to be substantially different from the outcomes of the asymptomatic infants in the randomised trial—for example, the scores on the Bayley scales of infant development were almost identical (90 ± 13 in the symptomatic infants compared with 85 ± 9 in the PET group and 88 ± 13 in the controls). Observational studies suggest that symptoms attributed to polycythaemia do improve after PET, but these are in any case transient, and the lack of controls prevents us from drawing any firm conclusions about the effect of PET on timing of resolution of symptoms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Inclusion/exclusion criteria</th>
<th>Randomisation</th>
<th>Masking of examiners</th>
<th>Completeness of follow up</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Van der Elst et al.</td>
<td>Clearly stated</td>
<td>Not clearly stated</td>
<td>Examiner was masked to intervention status</td>
<td>Exact percentage follow up at 8 months not stated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldberg et al.</td>
<td>Clearly stated</td>
<td>Not clearly stated</td>
<td>Examiners were masked to intervention status</td>
<td>There was complete follow up in the treated; 60% untreated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black et al.</td>
<td>Clearly stated</td>
<td>Drawing a card from deck generated by a random number table</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>Two year follow up of 62%. Some data provided on failure of follow up. 7 year follow up of 49/93.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bada et al.</td>
<td>Clearly stated</td>
<td>Not clearly stated</td>
<td>Examiners were masked to intervention status</td>
<td>Follow up was 67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ratrisawadi et al.</td>
<td>Clearly stated</td>
<td>Alternate assignment</td>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>Follow up was 38%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1** Forest plot of effect of partial exchange transfusion in polycythaemic newborn infants on the proportion of infants with developmental delay at 24–30 months of age.
None of the studies that included both symptomatic and asymptomatic infants provided long term follow up information based on symptomatology. In particular, patients with severe neurological symptomatology (such as seizures) have not been reported separately, thus a possibility remains that such infants may have a long term benefit. This, however, has not been demonstrated, highlighting the fact that there is no reliable evidence to support current practice.

The study by Bada et al11 of asymptomatic infants assessed at 24 months or greater was unable to show any effect of PET on long term neurodevelopmental outcome. We combined the findings of this study with those of the much larger study of Black et al12 (including both symptomatic and asymptomatic infants) and still found no neurological benefit. Even follow up to 7 years did not reveal any significant differences between the groups. These data would seem to indicate that the cause of the impaired long term outcome is the cause of the polycythemia, usually intrauterine fetal hypoxia. Bada et al, for example, were unable to find an effect of PET, but noted from multiple regression analysis that fetal distress, hypoglycaemia, and maternal pre-eclampsia were associated with poor outcome.

Although not a planned part of our analysis, data on medium term outcomes (8 months of age) were recorded in two studies.28 29 Van der Elst et al28 reported that all infants followed to 8 months were neurologically normal and had ‘‘a neurological diagnosis at 24–30 months of age. RR, Relative risk; CI, confidence interval.

What this study adds

- Partial exchange transfusion was not associated with an improvement in long term neurodevelopmental outcome in polycythemic patients
- Umbilical partial exchange transfusion was associated with an increased risk of necrotising enterocolitis

by umbilical catheterisation. These data suggest a temporal and causative relation between NEC and umbilical PET. Thus the only apparent effect of PET from our analysis is an adverse outcome; however, many of the studies did not report the incidence of NEC, and the confidence intervals for this effect are very wide.

In conclusion, we could not find reliable evidence that there is a clinically important benefit from PET in infants with polycythemia. There is, specifically, no evidence of a long term neurological benefit. Although the outcome of polycythemic infants is poorer than that of concurrently enrolled infants without polycythemia,11 12 this is probably related to the underlying cause of polycythemia, and is not improved by PET. It remains possible that infants with severe neurological symptoms could benefit from PET, as the literature does not appear to have enough power to eliminate such a benefit. However, for infants with no symptoms or only minor symptoms, such as most of the infants enrolled in these studies, the clinical decision of whether to intervene with PET should take into account the lack of demonstrated benefit and the apparent increase in necrotising enterocolitis.

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REFERENCES


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