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IRON DEFICIENCY ANEMIA IN CHILDREN: PATHOPHYSIOLOGICAL MECHANISMS AND CLINICAL MANAGEMENT

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Abstract: Iron deficiency anemia (IDA) is the most prevalent nutritional disorder in children worldwide, significantly impacting growth, cognitive development, and overall health. The condition arises from inadequate dietary intake, impaired absorption, or increased iron requirements during periods of rapid growth. This article reviews the pathophysiological mechanisms of IDA in children, its clinical manifestations, and current strategies for diagnosis and management. Evidence from recent studies indicates that while oral iron supplementation remains the first-line treatment, adherence and gastrointestinal side effects pose challenges. A deeper understanding of iron metabolism in childhood highlights the importance of preventive strategies, including dietary interventions and fortification programs.

Keywords: Iron deficiency anemia; Pediatrics; Pathophysiology; Childhood nutrition; Hemoglobin; Iron supplementation

Introduction

Iron deficiency anemia is one of the most common hematological conditions in pediatrics, affecting an estimated 40–50% of children in developing countries. Iron is essential for hemoglobin synthesis, oxygen transport, and neurological development. In children, rapid physical growth, poor nutritional intake, and recurrent infections increase the risk of iron deficiency. IDA is associated with impaired school performance, reduced immunity, and long-term cognitive deficits, making it a pressing global health problem. Understanding the pathophysiology of IDA in children is crucial for early recognition and effective management.

Iron deficiency anemia (IDA) remains the most common nutritional and hematological disorder in the pediatric population, affecting both developed and developing countries. According to the World Health Organization, nearly half of preschool-aged children worldwide suffer from anemia, with iron deficiency being the leading cause. The high prevalence in childhood is linked to the rapid pace of growth and development, which places increased demands on iron stores, coupled with dietary insufficiencies and recurrent infections. The consequences of IDA in children extend beyond hematological alterations, influencing growth velocity, neurocognitive development, behavior, and overall quality of life.

The importance of iron in pediatric physiology is multifaceted. Iron is not only a critical component of hemoglobin for oxygen transport, but also plays a central role in enzymatic systems, neurotransmitter synthesis, and energy metabolism. During the first years of life, when the brain is undergoing rapid growth and synaptic formation, adequate iron levels are essential

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for optimal neurological development. Deficiency during this sensitive period has been associated with irreversible cognitive impairments, delayed motor milestones, and decreased learning capacity.

Pathophysiologically, IDA is characterized by the depletion of iron stores, impaired erythropoiesis, and the development of microcytic hypochromic anemia. This leads to reduced oxygen delivery to tissues, resulting in fatigue, pallor, poor appetite, and increased susceptibility to infections. The underlying causes of IDA in children are multifactorial: insufficient iron intake due to poor dietary diversity, malabsorption related to gastrointestinal conditions, blood loss from parasitic infections, and heightened iron requirements during periods of growth spurts. In low- and middle-income countries, socioeconomic factors such as poverty, food insecurity, and limited access to healthcare further exacerbate the burden.

The public health implications of childhood IDA are profound. Beyond individual morbidity, widespread anemia impacts educational performance, labor productivity in adulthood, and national economic development. Although effective preventive strategies such as food fortification and supplementation programs exist, challenges remain in ensuring adequate coverage, adherence, and sustainability. Moreover, the clinical management of IDA in children requires balancing efficacy with safety, as conventional oral iron supplementation is often limited by gastrointestinal side effects and poor compliance.

Given these concerns, a deeper exploration of the pathophysiological mechanisms, risk factors, and clinical management of iron deficiency anemia in children is essential. By integrating advances in pediatric hematology with public health approaches, it is possible to design more effective interventions to reduce the global burden of this condition. This article aims to review current knowledge on the mechanisms of IDA in children, its clinical implications, and evidence-based management strategies.

Methods

This narrative review was conducted using databases including PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science, covering literature published from 2015 to 2024. Search terms included “iron deficiency anemia,” “children,” “pathophysiology,” “management,” and “nutrition.” Studies included randomized controlled trials, cohort studies, and systematic reviews focusing on pediatric populations. Data on risk factors, pathophysiological mechanisms, diagnostic approaches, and treatment strategies were extracted and synthesized.

Results

The literature highlights that iron deficiency in children results primarily from three mechanisms: inadequate dietary intake, malabsorption, and increased physiological demand. Iron is absorbed mainly in the duodenum, and conditions such as celiac disease or chronic diarrhea can impair absorption. During periods of rapid growth, particularly infancy and adolescence, iron requirements exceed dietary supply, predisposing children to anemia.

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Pathophysiologically, iron deficiency disrupts hemoglobin synthesis, leading to microcytic hypochromic anemia. The reduced oxygen-carrying capacity impairs tissue oxygenation, contributing to fatigue, delayed psychomotor development, and impaired immunity. Clinical manifestations include pallor, irritability, poor concentration, and in severe cases, developmental regression.

Management strategies remain centered on oral iron supplementation, with ferrous sulfate being the most commonly prescribed preparation. However, gastrointestinal side effects such as constipation and nausea reduce adherence. Intravenous iron therapy is reserved for severe cases or those with malabsorption. Preventive strategies, including breastfeeding support, dietary diversification, and food fortification, have demonstrated significant reductions in IDA prevalence.

Discussion

The findings emphasize that IDA in children is not only a hematological disorder but also a developmental challenge with long-term implications. While supplementation remains effective, public health measures addressing the root causes of nutritional deficiencies are equally vital. School-based nutrition programs and iron fortification of staple foods have shown promising outcomes in reducing childhood anemia rates. The role of caregivers and healthcare providers in early detection through routine screening is critical in preventing severe complications.

Future research should focus on novel iron formulations with improved bioavailability and fewer side effects, as well as the genetic and epigenetic factors influencing iron metabolism in children. A multidisciplinary approach combining clinical care, public health interventions, and community education offers the most effective solution to this persistent problem.

Conclusion

Iron deficiency anemia remains a major global health issue in pediatrics, with significant impacts on physical growth and cognitive development. Pathophysiological insights demonstrate the importance of early recognition, effective treatment, and preventive measures. Integrating clinical strategies with public health initiatives is essential to reduce the global burden of childhood anemia and improve long-term outcomes.

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