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CONGENITAL HEART DEFECTS: MODERN DIAGNOSTIC APPROACHES AND SURGICAL CORRECTION

Abdulkhakova R.M.
Andijan state medical institute Uzbekistan, Andijan

Abstract: Congenital heart defects (CHDs) represent the most common congenital malformations in neonates, accounting for nearly one-third of all congenital anomalies and a leading cause of infant morbidity and mortality. Advances in prenatal imaging, echocardiography, and surgical techniques have dramatically improved early diagnosis, treatment, and survival outcomes. This article discusses the embryological basis, classification, and pathophysiology of CHDs, emphasizing modern diagnostic modalities such as fetal echocardiography, cardiac MRI, and 3D CT angiography. The paper also reviews current surgical correction methods, including open-heart procedures, catheter-based interventions, and hybrid surgical approaches. Understanding the evolution of diagnostic and therapeutic strategies is crucial for optimizing the management and prognosis of patients with congenital heart defects.

Key words: congenital heart defects, fetal echocardiography, cardiac surgery, MRI, cyanotic heart disease, pediatric cardiology

Introduction

Congenital heart defects are structural abnormalities of the heart or great vessels present at birth, resulting from disturbances during cardiac embryogenesis between the third and eighth weeks of gestation. The global incidence of CHDs is approximately 8–10 per 1,000 live births, varying according to geographic and environmental factors. Despite remarkable advances in pediatric cardiology, CHDs remain a major cause of perinatal mortality and long-term cardiac morbidity.

The spectrum of CHDs ranges from simple defects, such as atrial septal defect (ASD) and ventricular septal defect (VSD), to complex malformations like tetralogy of Fallot, transposition of the great arteries, and hypoplastic left heart syndrome. These anomalies lead to hemodynamic imbalance, impaired oxygen delivery, and congestive heart failure if untreated.

Modern diagnostic technologies have revolutionized early detection and management. Fetal echocardiography allows the identification of major CHDs during mid-gestation, enabling prenatal counseling and planned delivery in specialized centers. Postnatal imaging modalities, including Doppler echocardiography, computed tomography (CT), and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), provide precise anatomical and functional assessment before surgical intervention.

The present study aims to analyze the modern diagnostic approaches for CHDs and to discuss current surgical correction strategies that have significantly improved survival and quality of life in affected children.

Materials and Methods

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This review was based on a comprehensive analysis of scientific publications, clinical guidelines, and meta-analyses published between 2015 and 2024 in PubMed, ScienceDirect, and the American Heart Association (AHA) databases.

Inclusion criteria included studies focusing on diagnostic imaging, surgical correction, and postoperative outcomes of congenital heart defects in neonates and children. Data were extracted concerning diagnostic accuracy, mortality rates, surgical innovations, and long-term follow-up results.

Anatomical and physiological aspects of the most common CHDs were summarized to establish their diagnostic and therapeutic implications. The information was synthesized to identify evidence-based modern practices in pediatric cardiology and surgery.

Results

1. Modern Diagnostic Approaches

The diagnosis of CHDs has evolved from traditional auscultation and chest X-rays to sophisticated imaging techniques that allow detailed visualization of intracardiac structures and blood flow dynamics.

Fetal Echocardiography:

Fetal echocardiography, typically performed between 18 and 24 weeks of gestation, remains the cornerstone of prenatal diagnosis. Two-dimensional and Doppler modalities enable real-time visualization of cardiac chambers, valves, and great arteries. Early detection facilitates parental counseling, delivery planning, and even fetal intervention in selected cases.

Transthoracic Echocardiography (TTE):

After birth, TTE is the primary diagnostic tool for evaluating cardiac morphology, shunt flow, and ventricular function. The use of color Doppler and three-dimensional (3D) echocardiography enhances spatial resolution, improving accuracy in identifying septal defects, valvular abnormalities, and complex lesions.

Cardiac MRI and CT Angiography:

Cardiac MRI provides superior soft-tissue contrast and functional assessment without radiation exposure. It is particularly valuable for evaluating great vessel anomalies, right ventricular function, and post-surgical outcomes. CT angiography, with 3D reconstruction, is indispensable for mapping extracardiac vascular anatomy in complex CHDs such as pulmonary atresia or double-outlet right ventricle.

Cardiac Catheterization:

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Although less frequently used as a primary diagnostic tool due to noninvasive imaging advances, cardiac catheterization remains crucial for hemodynamic assessment and interventional therapy. Pressure gradients, oxygen saturations, and flow measurements obtained during catheterization guide surgical planning and postoperative management.

2. Surgical Correction and Modern Interventions

Advances in surgical techniques have transformed CHD outcomes from fatal to largely curable. Surgical correction depends on the type and severity of the defect, patient age, and associated anomalies.

Open-Heart Surgery:

Cardiopulmonary bypass-based open surgery is the standard for correcting complex CHDs. Common procedures include patch closure of septal defects, arterial switch operation for transposition of great arteries, and complete repair of tetralogy of Fallot. Improved myocardial protection and miniaturized circuits have reduced intraoperative risks.

Catheter-Based and Hybrid Interventions:

Minimally invasive, catheter-based procedures such as balloon valvuloplasty, device closure of ASD/VSD, and stent placement for coarctation of the aorta offer alternatives to open surgery. Hybrid procedures, combining surgical exposure with catheter-guided interventions, are increasingly applied in neonatal and complex cases.

Postoperative Outcomes:

Postoperative survival rates have improved dramatically, with more than 90% of children surviving into adulthood in developed centers. However, late complications such as arrhythmia, pulmonary hypertension, and residual shunts remain challenges that require long-term surveillance through periodic imaging and functional assessment.

Discussion

The evolution of diagnostic and therapeutic approaches in CHDs reflects the integration of embryology, imaging technology, and surgical innovation. Early and precise diagnosis has become the cornerstone of successful management, reducing neonatal mortality and improving long-term functional outcomes.

The pathogenesis of CHDs involves multifactorial interactions of genetic, epigenetic, and environmental factors. Early identification through fetal echocardiography allows prompt referral to tertiary centers, where multidisciplinary teams can plan surgical correction soon after birth. Studies have shown that prenatal detection significantly decreases morbidity and improves postoperative recovery.

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Modern imaging techniques have revolutionized our understanding of congenital cardiac anatomy. The advent of 3D echocardiography and high-field MRI enables precise mapping of spatial relationships, which is particularly valuable for surgical planning. These advances have also expanded the indications for minimally invasive correction, decreasing hospital stay and recovery time.

Surgical correction of CHDs has shifted from simple palliation to complete anatomical repair. The arterial switch operation, for instance, now offers physiological correction for transposition of great arteries with excellent outcomes. Similarly, staged procedures for single-ventricle defects, such as the Fontan operation, have improved survival in previously untreatable cases.

However, challenges persist. In low-resource settings, delayed diagnosis, lack of specialized equipment, and limited access to pediatric cardiac surgery remain major barriers. Long-term follow-up studies reveal residual or progressive lesions in up to 20–30% of patients, underscoring the need for lifelong cardiac monitoring.

The future of CHD management lies in the integration of genetic screening, regenerative medicine, and artificial intelligence–based diagnostic algorithms. Gene editing and stem cell–based myocardial repair offer promising perspectives for structural and functional recovery beyond conventional surgery.

Conclusion

Congenital heart defects represent a complex group of developmental anomalies that require early, accurate, and multidisciplinary management. Modern diagnostic tools, particularly fetal and postnatal echocardiography, cardiac MRI, and CT angiography, have revolutionized early detection and surgical planning.

Surgical correction has evolved from palliative to definitive repair, supported by technological advances in cardiopulmonary bypass, myocardial protection, and minimally invasive interventions. The combination of imaging precision and surgical innovation has reduced mortality and improved life expectancy among patients with CHDs.

Despite these achievements, long-term management remains essential to monitor late complications and ensure optimal cardiac performance. Future strategies integrating prenatal genomics, molecular diagnostics, and tissue engineering hold promise for achieving truly curative approaches in congenital heart disease. Continuous research, global collaboration, and equal access to advanced care are crucial to further improving outcomes for children born with congenital heart defects

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