Association of Neural Tube Defects with maternal and neonatal serum vitamin B12 level in Bangladesh: A multicenter case control study

Fakhrul Amin

Sheikh Hasina Medical College, Tangail

Abu Faisal Mohammad Pervez

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical College and Hospital, Faridpur

Mohammad Shahidullah

BSMMU: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University

Abdul Mannan

BSMMU: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University

Sanjoy Kumar Dey

BSMMU: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University

Mohammad Kamrul Hasan Sabuj

BSMMU: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University

Ferdous Jahan Binte Rashid

Institute of Child and Mother Health

Hasnat Sujon (✉ hasnatsujon@gmail.com)

Directorate General of Health Services, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Mohakhali, Dhaka

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6365-1298>

Mohammad Habibur Rahman Sarker

Hiroshima University: Hiroshima Daigaku

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Abstract

Background: Neural tube defects (NTDs), a congenital deformity of the central nervous system attributed to multifactorial etiology including nutritional factors e.g., folic acid deficiency. Some studies suggested deficiency of vitamin B₁₂ may be another factor behind NTDs due to its intimate metabolic pathway with folic acid. This study aimed to identify the association of NTDs with maternal and neonatal serum vitamin B₁₂ level.

Methods: This case-control study was conducted from January 2014 to June 2015 in three tertiary level hospitals at Dhaka, Bangladesh. 32 cases (neonate with NTDs-mother pair) were selected from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) Hospital (18), Dhaka Medical College Hospital (8) and Sir Salimullah Medical College and Mitford hospital (6). 40 age and sex matched controls were selected from BSMMU. A baseline assessment of the mothers on age, parity, education, residence, antenatal checkup, method of delivery and socio-economic status was taken. Vitamin B₁₂ was estimated from the venous blood sample of the mother and newborn within 7 days after delivery. We considered <200 pg/ml of vitamin B₁₂ as 'deficiency', 200-300 pg/ml as 'marginal deficiency' and >300 pg/ml as 'normal'. Quantitative data were expressed as mean $\pm$ SD and qualitative data were expressed as proportion. Chi-square test and student's unpaired t-test was used for comparison of categorical and continuous variables respectively. Pearson correlation was used to determine the correlation between continuous variables.

Result: Mothers with low socio-economic status ($p=0.004$) and irregular antenatal checkup ($p=0.029$) were significantly higher among the cases. Serum vitamin B12 level of mother ($p<0.01$) and newborn ($p<0.01$) were significantly lower among the cases. Vitamin B12 deficient newborn were significantly higher among the cases (50% vs. 25%). Maternal and neonatal serum vitamin B12 levels were positively correlated with both case (Pearson R=0.517) and control (Pearson R=0.627) groups.

Conclusion: This study finding suggests that both maternal and neonatal low serum vitamin B₁₂ level is associated with NTDs. Vitamin B₁₂ supplementation along with folic acid may be considered for to-be-mothers to prevent NTDs.

Background

Being one of the common birth defects worldwide (Greene and Copp 2014), 0.3 million babies are born with neural tube defects (NTDs) worldwide every year, resulting in approximately 0.088 million deaths and 8.6 million disability-adjusted life years (Zaganjor et al. 2016). NTDs ranging from anencephaly causing death of the fetus to spina bifida occulta causing partial paralysis of the neonate develop during the first month of pregnancy due to non- or incomplete closure of neural tube (Wang et al. 2019). The etiology of NTDs is the additive involvement of several risk factors including genetic, environmental, and nutritional factors (Greene and Copp 2014). From a preventive point of view, maternal nutritional risk factors provide a battling front.

Maternal folate deficiency has been widely regarded as an important risk factor to increase the vulnerability to NTDs in the fetus and up to 75% NTDs incidence has been reduced by folic acid supplementation to to-be-mothers (Zhang et al. 2009; Greene and Copp 2014; Kancherla et al. 2017). Several studies suggested that deficiency of other nutrients may have potential role in development of NTDs. Due to its close link to folate metabolism and as infant store and cord blood concentration of vitamin B₁₂ is linked to maternal serum vitamin B₁₂ level pre-pregnant and pregnant state, vitamin B₁₂ is perceived to be an important determinant of NTDs (Molloy et al. 2008; Molloy et al. 2009; Peker et al. 2016; Finkelstein et al. 2019).

One study reported that 42% of the pregnant mothers in Bangladesh are vitamin B₁₂ deficient (Riaz et al. 2018). Regarding NTDs, although a nationwide population-based data is unavailable, using available surveillance data, the reported prevalence in Bangladesh is 4.7 per 1000 live birth (Christianson et al. 2006). Despite the high prevalence of vitamin B₁₂ deficient mothers and almost twice of the global average prevalence of NTDs, no data is available in Bangladesh to distinguish the relationship of NTDs with maternal and newborn serum vitamin B₁₂ level. Therefore, this hospital based multi-center study was aimed to identify the association of NTDs with maternal and neonatal serum vitamin B₁₂ level.

Methods

Study site and population: This case-control study was conducted from January 2014 to June 2015 in three tertiary level hospitals at Dhaka, Bangladesh: Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) Hospital, Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) and Sir Salimullah Medical College and Mitford Hospital (SSMCH). 32 cases (mother- neonate with NTDs pairs) were selected from the neonatal intensive care unit of BSMMU (18), DMCH (8) and SSMCH (6). 40 postnatal age and sex matched controls with diagnosis other than NTDs were selected from BSMMU. Mothers who took vitamin B₁₂ or B-Complex supplementation during pregnancy period, had history of diabetes mellitus, took anticonvulsant or antifolate drugs and/or had radiation exposure during the first trimester of pregnancy were excluded from the study (Figure 1).

Laboratory method

We draw 2-3 ml of venous blood for vitamin B₁₂ estimation from the mother and newborn by venipuncture within 7 days after delivery and collected them in a capped polypropylene tube labeled with allocated number to reduce bias and transferred them to the department of biochemistry, BSMMU with standard procedure. Serum was separated by centrifugation (4000 rpm for 5 minutes), and hemolyzed sample was discarded. Serum vitamin B₁₂ level was calculated using the Chemiluminescent Microparticle Immunoassay on Architect 2000 analyzer. We considered <200 pg/ml of vitamin B₁₂ as 'deficiency', 200-300 pg/ml as 'marginal deficiency' and >300 pg/ml as 'normal' (Yetim et al. 2019).

Statistical analysis

We analyzed the data using the SPSS version 20.0 of SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL. Quantitative data was expressed as mean $\pm$ SD and qualitative data was expressed as proportion. We used Chi-square test and student's unpaired t-test for comparison of categorical and continuous variables respectively. Pearson correlation was used to determine the correlation between continuous variables. *p* value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

Among different types of NTDs observed among the study subjects, meningomyelocele (63%) was the most common followed by encephalocele (15%) and meningocele (9%) (Figure 2).

Comparison on baseline characteristics of the mothers showed that lower socio-economic status and irregular antenatal checkup were significantly high among the case compared to the control. However, we observed no significant difference among age of mother, maternal parity, delivery of neonate by normal delivery, high socio-economic status, education and rural residence between case and control (Table 1).

Table 1
Baseline characteristics of mother between case and control group

Baseline characteristics if mothers	Case (n=32)	Control (n=40)	<i>p</i> value
Age of mother in years (mean $\pm$ SD)	26.08 $\pm$ 5.66	25.73 $\pm$ 4.36	0.086
Parity of mother (mean $\pm$ SD)	1.87 $\pm$ 1.8	1.77 $\pm$ 0.88	0.127
Normal vaginal delivery of the neonate	13(41)	7 (18)	0.055
Socio-economic status ^a			
Low	12 (38)	3 (8)	0.004
Middle	13 (41)	20 (50)	1
High	7 (21)	17 (42)	0.111
Education			
Illiterate	5 (16)	0	1
$\geq$ 10 years	11 (34)	10 (25)	0.542
<10 years	16 (50)	30 (75)	0.051
Rural residence	15 (47)	21 (53)	0.812
Irregular antenatal checkup	15 (47)	8 (20)	0.029
^a Socio-economic status was categorized arbitrarily based on family income per month: low (<BDT 10000), middle (BDT 10000-20000), high (>BDT 20000)			

We found that serum vitamin B₁₂ level of the mother and the newborn were significantly lower among the cases than the controls. No significant difference was observed between maternal deficiency and marginal deficiency of vitamin B₁₂ between cases and controls. Vitamin B₁₂ deficiency of newborn were significantly high among the cases than the controls; however, there was no significant association with marginal deficiency of vitamin B₁₂ between newborn of two groups (Table 2).

Table 2
Serum vitamin B₁₂ level of the mother and newborn between case and control groups.

Characteristics	Case (n=32)	Control (n=40)	<i>p</i> value
Serum vitamin B12 (pg/ml) of mother (mean ± SD)	202.06±51.68	276.25±89.02	<0.01
Serum vitamin B12 (pg/ml) of newborn (mean ± SD)	238.09±64.37	373.22±145.43	<0.01
Differential level of serum vitamin B12 (pg/ml) of mother, n (%)			
Normal (>300 pg/ml)	3 (9)	18 (45)	1
Marginal deficiency (200-300 pg/ml)	13 (41)	12 (30)	0.48
Deficiency (<200 pg/ml)	16 (50)	10 (25)	0.05
Differential level of serum vitamin B12 (pg/ml) of newborn, n (%)			
Normal (>300 pg/ml)	4 (12)	23 (58)	1
Marginal deficiency (200-300 pg/ml)	20 (63)	15 (37)	0.06
Deficiency (<200 pg/ml)	8 (25)	2 (5)	0.03

In both case and control group, we observed statistically significant positive correlation between maternal and neonatal serum vitamin B₁₂ levels (Figure 3).

Discussion

We have observed that the mean maternal serum B₁₂ level of the case mothers is lower than the control mothers. Moreover, 50% of the case mothers are vitamin B₁₂ deficient, which is only 25% in case of control mothers. Maternal vitamin B₁₂ deficiency has been widely reported in low- and middle-income countries as well as in Bangladesh (Darnton-Hill and Mkparu 2015; Riaz et al. 2018; Darnton-Hill 2019). It is well documented that the deficiency of folate is an important risk factor for NTDs, although the mechanism by which folate causes NTDs is unknown (Greene and Copp 2014). The intimate linkage of vitamin B₁₂ with folate is due its cofactor activity for the enzyme methionine synthase, which uses 5-methyltetrahydrofolate as a carbon donor. Thereby, deficiency of vitamin B₁₂ can disrupt the intracellular folate pathway (Froese et al. 2019). Due to this closely linked metabolism, it has been discussed that

cellular uptake and utilization of folate cofactors can be augmented by vitamin B₁₂ supplementation, which in turn can prevent NTDs. Moreover, it has also been argued that food fortification with combined folic acid and vitamin B₁₂ may yield prevent NTDs better than folic acid alone as vitamin B₁₂ might have a self-determining role in this case (Molloy 2018).

Fetal and newborn vitamin B₁₂ status is thought to be determined by the maternal vitamin B₁₂ status during pregnancy (Finkelstein et al. 2019). Vitamin B₁₂, facilitated by transcobalamin, is transported across the placenta, although very little is known about this pathway from the maternal to the fetal circulation. Further, the placenta can regulate fetal B₁₂ uptake and reduced transcobalamin synthesis which causes vitamin B₁₂ deficiency to the neonate (Finkelstein et al. 2015). We have found that NTDs affected newborns had a lower level of serum vitamin B₁₂ level compared to the unaffected newborns and affected newborns have a higher percentage of either deficiency or marginal deficiency of vitamin B₁₂. A positive correlation was also revealed between the mother and newborn of both groups, that is the lower the mother's serum vitamin B₁₂, the lower was the baby's serum vitamin B₁₂ and vice versa which has been documented elsewhere (Molloy et al. 2009). This also emphasize the discussion of vitamin B₁₂ supplementation to the to-be-mothers.

In our study, NTDs mother are mostly from low socioeconomic status. Possible explanations of low level in these populations were due to low animal source food intake, religious believe, malabsorption in developing countries for their poor socio-economic condition (Villamor et al. 2008; Obeid et al. 2019). We also observed d a higher rate of history of irregular antenatal check-up among the case mothers which might be due to their financial burden. Worldwide meningomyelocele and encephalocele are the two most common birth defect among the NTDs (Laharwal et al. 2016; Sarmast et al. 2016) which is also our findings.

Strength and limitations

Strength of this study its being case-control in nature. We have taken at least one age and sex matched control in this multicenter study. However, sample of the study was small and causes of NTDs were not considered in the study.

Conclusion

This study finding suggests that both maternal and neonatal low serum vitamin B₁₂ level is associated with NTDs. Further study with large sample size would yield a more acceptable finding in this regard. Vitamin B₁₂ supplementation along with folic acid should be considered for to be mothers to prevent NTDs. Large multicenter randomized control trial may be carried out to establish whether periconceptional vitamin B₁₂ supplementation decreases NTDs.

Abbreviations

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: Ethical approval was taken from institutional review board of BSMMU. Written informed consent was taken from the mother.

Consent for publication: Not applicable

Availability of data and material: The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' contributions: FA, AFMP, MS coined the idea and designed the study; FA, AM, SKD, MKHS, FJBR collected the data; FA, HS and MHRS analyzed and interpret the data; FA, HS and MHRS wrote the first draft of the manuscript; all authors reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript to be published.

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Figures

Figure 1

Study profile.

BSMMU= Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital; DMCH= Dhaka Medical College Hospital; SSMCH= Sir Salimullah Medical College and Mitford Hospital

Figure 2

Different types of neural tube defects observed among cases (n=32).

A

B

Figure 3

Correlation of serum vitamin B12 between mother and newborn.

A. Case; B. Control