Neonatal Procedural Pain and Preterm Infant Cortisol Response to Novelty at 8 Months

Ruth E. Grunau, PhD*‡; Joanne Weinberg, PhD§; and Michael F. Whitfield, MD‡

ABSTRACT. Objectives. Stress systems may be altered in the long term in preterm infants for multiple reasons, including early exposure to procedural pain in neonatal intensive care. This question has received little attention beyond hospital discharge. Stress responses (cortisol) to visual novelty in preterm infants who were born at extremely low gestational age (ELGA; ≤28 weeks), very low gestational age (VLGA; 29–32 weeks), and term were compared at 8 months of age corrected for prematurity (corrected chronological age [CCA]). In addition, among the preterm infants, we evaluated whether cortisol levels at 8 months were related to neonatal exposure to procedural pain and morphine in the neonatal intensive care unit.

Methods. Seventy-six infants, 54 preterm (≤32 weeks’ GA at birth) and 22 term-born infants who were seen at 8 months CCA composed the study sample, after excluding those with major sensory, motor, or cognitive impairment. Salivary cortisol was measured before (basal) and 20 minutes after introduction of novel toys (post 1) and after developmental assessment (post 2).

Results. Salivary cortisol was significantly higher in ELGA infants at 8 months, compared with the VLGA and term groups before and after introduction of visual novelty. Term-born and VLGA infants showed a slight decrease in cortisol when playing with novel toys, whereas the ELGA group showed higher basal and sustained levels of cortisol. After controlling for early illness severity and duration of supplemental oxygen, higher basal cortisol levels in preterm infants at 8 months’ CCA were associated with higher number of neonatal skin-breaking procedures. In contrast, cortisol responses to novelty were predicted equally well by neonatal pain or GA at birth. No relationship between morphine dosing and cortisol response was demonstrated in these infants.

Conclusions. ELGA preterm infants show a different pattern of cortisol levels before and after positive stimulation of visual novelty than more maturely born, VLGA preterm and term-born infants. Exposure to high numbers of skin-breaking procedures may contribute to “resetting” basal arousal systems in preterm infants.

ABBREVIATIONS. HPA, hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal; NICU, neonatal intensive care unit; ELGA, extremely low gestational age; VLGA, very low gestational age; SNAP-II, Score for Neonatal Acute Physiology II; CCA, corrected chronological age.

Multiple lines of evidence suggest that early repeated and prolonged pain exposure may contribute to altered development of pain systems, behavior, cognition, and learning in former preterm infants later in childhood.1–7 There is a large body of experimental animal literature demonstrating that environmental manipulations in the neonatal period can lead to permanent shifts in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis reflecting stress reactivity (see reviews in 8,9). Furthermore, novelty-induced fearfulness in rodents is altered by neonatal stress10 and pain.11 However, there is a dearth of direct evidence in human preterm infants that neonatal pain exposure leads to shifts in later stress responses after discharge from the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU).

Although most preterm infants, even those who are born at extremely low birth weight, display intelligence within broadly normal limits during childhood, they are at high risk of learning and behavior difficulties at school age.12–23 Self-regulation of arousal is essential to initiating and maintaining attention and to accessing higher order “executive” functions such as planning and independent problem solving.24,25 Landmark changes have been described in the first year of life with respect to orienting to objects and control of distress26 and subsequently in children’s abilities to plan and regulate cognitive skills.27 Preterm infants who are born at extremely low birth weight (≤800 g) show maladaptive behaviors during the stress of novel cognitive challenge compared with term-born children at 3 years28 and at school age,17 even when they have normal intelligence. Although it has been proposed that preterm infants are particularly vulnerable to altered self-regulation in coping with a continuum of positive and negative stimuli,28 the response to mildly arousing stimuli, such as exposure to novelty, has not been studied in human preterm infants after NICU discharge. In previous work, we showed that infants who were born at ≤800 g birth weight displayed higher basal heart rate,7 suggesting a shift in arousal set point.

The aims of the present study were 1) to compare stress hormone (salivary cortisol) response before and after visual novelty in extremely low gestational...
age (ELGA), very low gestational age (VLGA), and term-born infants; 2) to examine whether more exposure to neonatal skin-breaking procedures (pain) is linked to higher basal cortisol and/or increased cortisol response to novelty at 8 months of age corrected for prematurity; and 3) to evaluate whether there is an association between amount of morphine exposure and the effect of early procedural pain on cortisol responsiveness. We hypothesized that 1) basal cortisol will be higher in ELGA compared with VLGA and term-born infants; 2) ELGA infants will display increased cortisol responses after structured interaction with novel toys at 8 months, whereas VLGA and term-born infants will not show a stress response to novelty and may even find exposure to novelty positive or arousal reducing; 3) among the preterm infants, higher exposure to neonatal skin-breaking procedures will be associated with increased basal and challenge cortisol levels at 8 months of age, after controlling for neonatal illness severity; and 4) among the preterm infants, greater neonatal morphine exposure will modulate the long-term effects of exposure to neonatal procedures (ie, will be associated with lower basal and challenge cortisol levels at 8 months, after controlling for neonatal illness severity). To our knowledge, this is the first study of endocrine stress response (salivary cortisol) to novelty in human preterm infants.

METHODS

Participants

The study sample comprised 76 infants: 19 preterm infants who were born at ELGA (<28 weeks; 10 boys, 9 girls), 34 preterm infants who were born at VLGA (29–32 weeks; 17 boys, 17 girls; Table 1), and 22 term-born control subjects (13 boys, 9 girls), of mean birth weight 3584.8 g (SD: 537.9) and GA 40.1 weeks (SD: 1.4). The preterm infants were recruited from the NICU at British Columbia’s Children’s Hospital, which is the major tertiary neonatal unit in British Columbia. The term-born infants were recruited before discharge from 2 major metropolitan full-term nurseries at British Columbia Women’s and St. Paul’s Hospitals. These hospitals are affiliated with the University of British Columbia. All infants were recruited by 1 neonatal research nurse. Infants in the present study were seen in the Biobehavioral Research Unit, Centre for Community Child Health Research at 8 months of age corrected for prematurity. Infants with a major congenital anomaly, major neurosensory impairment, or maternal drug use during pregnancy were excluded.

Measures

Visual Novelty

The visual novelty paradigm followed the methods of Ruff,39-40 which have been used to study sustained attention and exploratory play in preterm infants. Each infant was presented with 4 different toys in a standard order, 1 at a time. When the focus of a study is individual differences, a standard order is preferred.51 The toys were plastic and washable and varied in color and texture.

Cortisol

Saliva was obtained using a small cotton dental roll (without any stimulant) and was placed into a needless syringe. The saliva was expressed into a vial and stored in the Biobehavioral Research Unit (frozen at −20°C) until transported to Dr Weinberg’s laboratory at the University of British Columbia for cortisol assay. Cortisol was assayed from saliva samples using the Salimetrics High Sensitivity Salivary Cortisol Enzyme Immunoassay Kit for quantitative determination of salivary cortisol (Salimetrics LLC, Philadelphia, PA). Intra-assay and interassay coefficients of variation were 2.92% and 3.41%, respectively.

Medical Chart Review

Medical and nursing chart review from birth to term (39 weeks, 6 days) was conducted for each preterm infant by a neonatal nurse, including but not limited to birth weight, gestational age, illness severity (Score for Neonatal Acute Physiology II [SNAP-II]) on days 1 and 3, days of mechanical ventilation, days of oxygen, daily dosage of opioid and other medications adjusted for daily weight, and number of skin-breaking procedures. Procedural pain exposure was operationalized as the sum of every skin-breaking procedure from birth to term (eg, heel lance, intramuscular injection, chest tube insertion, central line insertion). Each attempt at a procedure was included; thus, the total sum reflected all skin breaks. Although it is recognized that procedures differ in pain intensity, in the absence of an empirical basis for assigning weights to every procedure, counting is used as a “marker” of infant acute pain exposure in the NICU.32-34 In our study, the total number of skin-breaking procedures also provided a marker of overall stress exposure from birth to term. Total intravenous morphine exposure was calculated from birth to term as follows. The average daily dose of intravenous morphine adjusted for daily weight was multiplied by the number of days of intravenous morphine, as we have used previously.36 For example, if an infant received an average dose of 0.39 mg/kg body weight for 24 treatment days, then the morphine score was 9.36 (mg/kg).

Procedures

Written informed consent was obtained from mothers, following the procedures approved by the Clinical Research Ethics Board of the University of British Columbia and the research review committee at the Children’s and Women’s Health Centre of British Columbia. Infants were tested with their mothers in the

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<th>TABLE 1. Preterm Infant Characteristics</th>
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<tr>
<td>GA at birth</td>
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<td>Birth weight</td>
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<td>Illness severity day 1 (SNAP-II)</td>
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<td>Illness severity day 3 (SNAP-II)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pain exposure (no. of skin-breaking procedures)*</td>
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<td>Mechanical ventilation, d*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preterm 22–28</td>
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<td>Weeks’ GA at Birth</td>
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<tr>
<td>26.6 (1.8)</td>
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<td>877.5 (290.4)</td>
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<td>120.2 (11.8)</td>
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<td>11.3 (10.6)</td>
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<td>193.4 (107.3)</td>
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<td>32.4 (26.9)</td>
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<td>36.6 (25.4)</td>
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<td>5.1 (7.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preterm 29–32</td>
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<td>Weeks’ GA at Birth</td>
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<td>30.9 (1.4)</td>
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<td>1495 (455.6)</td>
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<td>9.9 (11.1)</td>
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<td>1.7 (3.7)</td>
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<td>72.4 (48.3)</td>
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<td>3.5 (8.3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.56 (14.3)</td>
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<td>1.8 (7.3)</td>
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Data are mean (SD).
* Recorded daily from birth to term (39 weeks, 6 days postconceptional age).
Infants in the study are presented in Table 1. Scores for the dexamethasone-exposed infants were well within the range of the ELGA nonexposed infants. All of the raw (nonwinsorized) cortisol outlier values with the closest value within the data analyses. This method involves replacing the predictor variable required for regression analysis. Thus, to allow for 5 predictors (controlling for illness severity on day 1 and day 3, and total number of days of oxygen, and examining independent effects of pain exposure and morphine exposure), a minimum of 50 preterm infants were required.

RESULTS

The cortisol data were examined for outliers, defined as any value >3 SD outside the mean in either direction at a given time point. Three infants had 1 or 2 outlier values, and all were male, preterm ELGA (22–28 weeks’ GA). One of these infants was receiving cortisol injections at 8 months CCA because of adrenal insufficiency and was therefore excluded, leaving 75 infants in the study. The outlier values for the remaining 2 boys were winsorized following the method of Tukey and retained for data analyses. This method involves replacing the outlier value with the closest value within the ±3 SD range. Of the 53 preterm infants, 8 had been exposed to postnatal dexamethasone, all of whom were in the ELGA group. All of the raw (nonwinsorized) cortisol scores for the dexamethasone-exposed infants were well within the range of the ELGA nonexposed infants. The perinatal/neonatal characteristics of the infants in the study are presented in Table 1.

Preterm ELGA, VLGA, and Term Groups: Cortisol

Repeated measures analysis of variance was conducted on cortisol levels at 8 months’ CCA across the phases (basal, post 1, and post 2), with infant group (ELGA, VLGA, and term) as a between-groups factor. The groups differed significantly in level of cortisol across phases (P = .006); the ELGA infants showed significantly higher cortisol compared with the VLGA and term-born groups combined (P = .002). In addition, the pattern of the ELGA group responses across the phases differed significantly compared with the VLGA and term infants (Fig 1). The VLGA group dropped significantly from basal to post 1 (P = .02), then increased slightly from post 1 to post 2 (P = .12). The term infants showed a slight decrease from basal to post 1 (P = .105), then increased significantly from post 1 to post 2 (P = .04). Post hoc comparisons for the ELGA compared with the VLGA infants showed that cortisol levels were significantly higher for the ELGA group at basal (P = .03) and post 1 (P = .007) and approached significance at Post 2 (P = .066). Because development of the HPA axis in perterm infants may be linked to chronological age, we repeated the analysis of variance controlling statistically for chronological age; the group differences remained significant (P = .01).

Preterm Infants: Prediction of Cortisol at 8 Months’ CCA

First, Pearson correlations were conducted to examine interrelationships of neonatal characteristics before regression analysis (Table 2). The number of neonatal skin-breaking procedures was significantly correlated with illness severity (SNAP-II) at day 1 (r = .43, P = .001) and day 3 (r = .58, P = .0001) and with intravenous morphine exposure since birth (r = .58, P = .001). Days of oxygen, which was only moderately related to exposure to procedures (r = .35, P = .01) and not correlated with morphine exposure (P = -.03, not significant) was used as a marker of long-term illness in the neonatal period. Low gestational age at birth was highly correlated with greater illness severity at day 3 (r = -.67, P = .0001); therefore, illness severity at day 3 was a marker for both variables, and gestational age was not added to the regression. Higher number of days of mechanical ventilation was very highly associated with exposure to procedures (r = .92, P = .0001) and was not entered into the regression.

Then bivariate associations between the neonatal factors and the outcome measures (cortisol at 3 time points) were evaluated (Table 3). High basal cortisol
High post 1 cortisol was significantly associated with effects of morphine, was added in block 3, breaking procedures was entered, and in block 4, the neonatal period. In block 3, the number of skin-breaking procedures (see above). Post 2 cortisol was not predicted by GA (standardized $\beta = -0.25, t = -1.26, P = .21$); therefore, we concluded that procedural pain exposure was the significant factor in relation to altered basal cortisol at 8 months. In contrast, post 1 cortisol was significantly associated with GA (standardized $\beta = -0.46, t = -2.29, P = .026$) to the same extent as number of skin-breaking procedures (see above). Post 2 cortisol was not predicted by GA (standardized $\beta = -0.33 t = -1.59, P = .118$).

**DISCUSSION**

Studies using animal models have reported that behavioral and/or hormonal responses to novelty in adulthood are altered following chronic unpredictable prenatal stress, neonatal stress, or repetitive neonatal pain. In the present study, our hypotheses that at 8 months of age basal cortisol would be higher and visual novelty would elicit greater cortisol responses in preterm infants who were born at the lowest gestational ages, compared with VLGA or term-born infants, was confirmed. At 8 months, the pattern of cortisol shown by the ELGA preterm infants (22–28 weeks’ GA) differed significantly from the other groups. Term-born infants and VLGA preterm infants who were born at 29 to 32 weeks’ GA displayed a slight drop in cortisol after the introduction of visual novelty, consistent with sustained attention and interest. After this phase, their cortisol returned to basal levels. In contrast, the ELGA infants displayed higher basal cortisol, which was sustained in response to visual novelty, followed by a slight drop at the end of testing.

Preterm infants were seen by corrected age so that...
the stimulus situation (visual novelty) used to elicit cortisol responses was developmentally appropriate for both groups. However, development of the HPA axis might be more closely linked to chronological age, and when age since birth is used, preterm infants are of course older. When the analyses were redone controlling for chronological age, the differences between the groups remained. Thus, our results were not an artifact of the HPA axis in the groups being at different developmental stages dependent on duration of postnatal life.

We confirmed the hypothesis that, after controlling for neonatal illness severity, higher neonatal procedural pain exposure was significantly linked to higher basal and cortisol levels in response to stress to visual novelty at 8 months. However, stress response to developmental assessment (the third cortisol) was not predicted by any neonatal variables. Self-regulation to stress sustained during the process of developmental assessment may be modulated by caregiver factors and the quality of the dyadic interaction with the individual infant; however, this requires additional investigation. In this study, we were unable to show that morphine administered in the neonatal period either ameliorated or exacerbated alterations in HPA axis responses, as manifested at 8 months.

There have been questions as to whether exposure to corticosteroids may have an impact on the HPA axis in preterm infants. Antenatal betamethasone was not associated with cortisol values on day 1 or day 3.41 Whereas antenatal dexamethasone was associated with suppressed adrenal function initially in VLGA infants, these effects were no longer apparent by day 14.42,43 However, the earlier studies examined responses to pharmacologic challenges to the adrenal axis. In this study, we used a psychological challenge, which brings into play other neural systems such as the hippocampus, which may be influenced by antenatal glucocorticoid exposure. Moreover, the timing of antenatal glucocorticoid exposure may explain differences in cortisol “set points” for ELGA and VLGA infants. That is, fetuses who are exposed to antenatal steroids at difference points in the development of the limbic-hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis may exhibit different impacts on the system. In the present study, few infants were given postnatal dexamethasone in the neonatal period, and their cortisol levels at 8 months did not differ from the unexposed infants.

In a previous study, we reported higher basal heart rate in infants of birthweight ≤800 g at 8 months compared with term-born control subjects.7 The number of skin-breaking procedures in the neonatal period is a marker for overall cumulative exposure to pain and stress. In ELGA infants, even routine noninvasive caregiving is more stressful than for more maturely born infants.44 Taken together with the present findings in the ELGA infants, we concluded that previous pain and/or cumulative stress may contribute to “resetting” basal physiologic regulation in the tiniest infants. These most vulnerable infants likely are chronically stressed and may have persistently altered cortisol levels, and/or their stress responses are poorly modulated so that even entry into the test setting is stressful before the test has begun. It is possible that there are critical ontogenetic processes that require continued in utero development that are disrupted by extremely preterm delivery. We need to be cautious about concluding that pain exposure is the only or even the best explanation for our findings. The shifts that we found in cortisol levels of the tiniest infants are probably determined by interactions of multiple factors.

The results of the present study are consistent with our previous work showing that children who are born at extremely low birth weight (even those with normal intelligence) display poorer self-regulatory behaviors during novel tasks during standardized cognitive assessment, compared with term-born children.17,28 These behaviors generally reflected poorer executive planning and control. For example, at 3 and 9 years, extremely low birth weight children were more easily distracted, needed urging to attempt and/or complete unfamiliar tasks, distrusted their ability, gave up easily, sought to terminate, preferred easy tasks, and required constant praise and encouragement. These children showed problems with effortful control during problem solving, reflected in poorer attention and self-regulation, especially as tasks became more cognitively challenging. We did not record the number of skin-breaking procedures for those studies; however, behavior problems were related to longer time spent in the NICU, rather than specifically lower gestation or birth weight.

With respect to long-term effects of morphine, we have previously reported that higher morphine exposure in the neonatal period was associated with “normalized” behavioral and cardiac reactivity to pain both in the NICU at 32 weeks’ postconceptional age33 and at 8 months.5,7 It is our impression that the overall amount of morphine exposure may be higher currently compared with our earlier cohorts, because many infants in our current sample could not be studied in the NICU phase of this research program as they were still receiving morphine at 32 weeks’ postconceptional age. In our earlier pain research in the NICU, we did not encounter this, suggesting increased use of morphine in the time period between the infants who were born in 1996–199833 versus our present cohort of infants who were born in 2000–2002. One possibility is that the action of morphine may prevent changes to pain systems but...
agents; for example, even repeated sucrose exposure
the longer or repeated exposure to any analgesic
support. Moreover, very little is known about
responses. The use of narcotics may be counterproduc-
the other hand, current attempts at pain relief in the
session with morphine, for routine procedures
morphine would not necessarily be the agent of
choice. There may be other agents better than mor-
phine for this population. One challenge with ongo-
ing morphine administration is that some infants
require a long period of weaning, which involves a
prolonged period of administration of reducing
doses of morphine during the latter part of the nurs-
ery stay. This may involve additional risk, because
morphine administered in the neonatal period has
different long-term effects on rodents depending on
whether it was given in the presence or absence of
pain. At the present time, the long-term effects of
neonatal morphine on later development are un-
clear. On the one hand, the results of our study
are reassuring in the case of morphine, however,
because higher amounts of morphine were not asso-
ciated with altered levels of cortisol at 8 months. On
the other hand, current attempts at pain relief in the
NICU may result in prolonged or repeated sedation
without preventing changes in subsequent stress re-
sponses. The use of narcotics may be counterproduc-
if such treatment prolongs the need for ventila-
tion. It is difficult to distinguish pain from
other discomfort or stress in immature preterm in-
fants; therefore, effectiveness is uncertain, and the
wrong doses may be given at the wrong frequency.
The major limitation of this study is that we did not
link exposure, dosing, and efficacy of morphine spe-
cifically to the timing of each skin-breaking proce-
dure.

In addition, exposure to prenatal stress can have
long-term effects on offspring and prenatal stres-
sors may themselves cumulatively contribute to pre-
term labor. Thus, in addition to the postnatal stress
of pain in the NICU, some of the differences between
ELGA and later born infants may at least partially
reflect prenatal stress.

**CONCLUSION**

In early human development, mechanisms of at-
tention, social-emotional regulation, temperament,
and cognitive functioning are interwoven. Arousal
regulation is an organizing construct for integrating
relationships between sensory stimulation, stress,
cortical activity, and performance. Our findings sug-
go that early repetitive procedural pain (and
thereby stress) in ELGA preterm neonates may “re-
set” arousal and thereby affect interaction with the
environment. Rather than considering pain reactivity
and cognitive approach/avoidance as separate do-
 mains, under this view, both would be seen as dif-
ferent aspects of underlying difficulties in arousal regu-
lation. The specific responses likely depend on
the level of the central nervous system involved,
from automatic conditioned reactivity to attention
and higher executive capabilities. Knowledge of the
cause of altered stress response to novelty in infancy
is important for understanding determinants of
learning and behavior problems in preterm infants
during later childhood. For addressing the broader
range of arousal and self-regulation, studies at mul-
tiple time points with multiple types of stressors are
needed. In conjunction with studies of human pre-
term neonates, more animal research is needed—
with careful attention to modeling multiple aspects
of neonatal intensive care.

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