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Journal of Clinical & Experimental Cardiology

Commentary

Ultrasound Evaluation of Echogenic Foci in the Fetal Heart

Linara Vexley*

Department of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany

DESCRIPTION

Echogenic foci in the fetal heart are a frequently observed finding during routine prenatal ultrasonography. These foci, often referred to as Intracardiac Echogenic Foci (ICEF), appear as small, bright spots within the myocardium, most commonly within the left ventricle. With advancements in prenatal imaging and high-resolution ultrasonography, the detection of these bright spots has become more common, raising questions among healthcare providers and expectant parents regarding their clinical significance, etiology, and implications for fetal development. Echogenic foci are defined as localized areas of increased reflectivity within the cardiac muscle that appear brighter than the surrounding myocardium on a grayscale ultrasound scan. These spots are typically less than 2 mm in diameter and are usually identified during the second trimester, around 18 weeks to 22 weeks of gestation. They are most frequently observed in the papillary muscles of the left ventricle but can occasionally be seen in the right ventricle or in both ventricles. On ultrasound, echogenic foci are discrete, well-circumscribed, and consistently maintain their echogenicity regardless of the angle of insonation.

The precise cause of echogenic foci remains incompletely understood, but several mechanisms have been proposed. Histopathologic studies have indicated that these foci may correspond to small calcifications or mineralized deposits within the papillary muscles or chordae tendineae. In some cases, they represent microcalcifications associated with early myocardial fibrosis or minor abnormalities in myocardial development. Other studies suggest a benign variant, particularly in isolated cases, where the echogenic focus does not correlate with any structural cardiac abnormality or postnatal cardiac dysfunction. It is important to note that echogenic foci are different from the echogenic calcifications associated with severe congenital heart disease or cardiomyopathies, as these latter findings are often more diffuse and extensive.

Intracardiac echogenic foci are relatively common, occurring in approximately 3% to 5% of all fetuses evaluated by mid-trimester ultrasound. They are more frequently detected in populations with high-resolution ultrasound technology and among skilled operators. The detection rate may also vary according to gestational age, maternal body habitus, and technical factors such as transducer frequency and image settings. The presence of an echogenic focus in the fetal heart has been a topic of significant discussion, particularly regarding its association with chromosomal abnormalities. Several studies have identified a modest association between echogenic foci and trisomy 21 (Down syndrome), with the risk being higher when echogenic foci are present alongside other structural abnormalities or soft markers, such as thickened nuchal translucency, short femur length, or absent nasal bone. However, when an echogenic focus is isolated, meaning it occurs in an otherwise structurally normal heart without other abnormal ultrasound markers, it is widely regarded as a benign variant. The majority of these cases result in the birth of healthy infants with no cardiac complications. Isolated echogenic foci rarely indicate underlying pathology and typically do not impact fetal growth, cardiac function, or postnatal outcomes.

The evaluation of echogenic foci in the fetal heart relies primarily on grayscale two-dimensional ultrasonography. Standard cardiac views, including the four-chamber view and long-axis views of the ventricles, are essential for accurate identification. Key aspects of ultrasound evaluation include determining whether the focus is located in the left ventricle, right ventricle, or both, measuring the approximate diameter, documenting the intensity of echogenicity relative to surrounding myocardial tissue, and assessing the heart and other fetal structures for additional anomalies or soft markers. In cases where echogenic foci are detected, repeat scans may be performed to confirm persistence or resolution. Color Doppler imaging can help differentiate echogenic foci from intracardiac thrombi or abnormal flow patterns. Three-dimensional ultrasonography may also provide enhanced visualization in complex cases, although its routine use is not generally necessary for isolated echogenic foci.

Counseling expectant parents regarding fetal echogenic foci is an important aspect of prenatal care. When echogenic foci are isolated and no other abnormalities are present, parents should be reassured that the likelihood of adverse outcomes is extremely low. It is important to provide clear information about the small, but increased, risk of chromosomal abnormalities when

Correspondence to: Linara Vexley, Department of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, Heidelberg University, Heidelberg, Germany, E-mail: l.vexley@rheinwaldinstitute.com

Received: 28-Nov-2025, Manuscript No. JCEC-25-40917; **Editor assigned:** 01-Dec-2025, PreQC No. JCEC-25-40917 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 15-Dec-2025, QC No. JCEC-25-40917; **Revised:** 22-Dec-2025, Manuscript No. JCEC-25-40917 (R); **Published:** 29-Dec-2025, DOI: 10.35248/2155-9880.25.16.986

Citation: Vexley L (2025). Ultrasound Evaluation of Echogenic Foci in the Fetal Heart. J Clin Exp Cardiolog. 16:986.

echogenic foci are combined with other markers. If additional risk factors exist, such as advanced maternal age, abnormal maternal serum screening results, or other soft markers, a detailed discussion about further testing, including noninvasive prenatal testing or diagnostic procedures like amniocentesis, may be warranted. However, invasive testing is generally not indicated for isolated echogenic foci in low-risk pregnancies.

CONCLUSION

Follow-up studies indicate that most infants with isolated echogenic foci detected prenatally are born without cardiac issues. Rarely, persistent echogenic foci can be identified postnatally, but they typically have no clinical significance. Routine postnatal echocardiography is not recommended unless there are additional risk factors or symptoms suggesting cardiac pathology. Echogenic foci in the fetal heart are a common finding in prenatal ultrasonography. While they can be associated with chromosomal abnormalities when accompanied by other markers, isolated echogenic foci generally represent a benign variant without impact on fetal or postnatal health. Accurate ultrasound evaluation, careful risk assessment, and clear parental counseling are essential components of managing these findings. With ongoing advancements in prenatal imaging and genetic screening, clinicians can provide precise, evidence-based guidance to expectant families, balancing reassurance with appropriate vigilance when indicated.