

An Overview on Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome

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DESCRIPTION

Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) is a complex clinical condition that arises from prenatal exposure to drugs, particularly opioids, and other substances. NAS occurs when a neonate who has been exposed to a substance in utero experiences withdrawal symptoms in the postnatal period. This syndrome can result in significant morbidity and mortality if not managed appropriately.

Epidemiology

The incidence of NAS has increased substantially over the past two decades, which is attributed to the rising rates of opioid use during pregnancy. In the United States, the incidence of NAS increased from 1.20 per 1,000 hospital births in 2000 to 8.00 per 1,000 hospital births in 2014. The incidence varies widely across different regions and countries, with some studies suggesting that the prevalence of NAS may be even higher in low-and middle-income countries.

Pathophysiology

NAS occurs when a neonate is exposed to opioids or other substances in utero and subsequently experiences withdrawal symptoms after birth. The severity of withdrawal symptoms is dependent on several factors, including the type and dose of substance used, the duration of exposure, and the timing of exposure in relation to gestational age.

Opioids, particularly short-acting opioids such as heroin and fentanyl, are the most common substances associated with NAS. These substances cross the placenta and bind to opioid receptors in the fetal brain, leading to tolerance and dependence. After birth, the abrupt cessation of opioid exposure leads to withdrawal symptoms, which can include tremors, irritability, poor feeding, vomiting, diarrhea, and seizures.

Diagnosis and management

Diagnosis of NAS is based on a combination of clinical and laboratory findings. Infants with NAS typically have a history of

prenatal opioid exposure, and clinical symptoms can vary in severity and duration. The Finnegan Neonatal Abstinence Scoring System is commonly used to assess the severity of withdrawal symptoms and guide treatment.

Management of NAS typically involves non-pharmacological interventions, such as swaddling, quiet environments, and supportive care. Pharmacological treatment may be necessary in severe cases, and opioids such as morphine or methadone are commonly used. The goal of pharmacological treatment is to reduce withdrawal symptoms to a tolerable level while minimizing the risk of adverse effects.

Prognosis

The prognosis for infants with NAS is generally good, with most infants recovering fully within a few weeks. However, untreated or undertreated NAS can lead to complications such as seizures, respiratory distress, and feeding difficulties, which can result in prolonged hospital stays and increased healthcare costs. Infants with NAS may also be at increased risk for developmental delays and behavioral problems later in life.

Prevention

Prevention of NAS is a key public health priority. Strategies to prevent NAS include increasing access to prenatal care, screening pregnant women for substance use disorders, providing medication-assisted treatment for opioid use disorders during pregnancy, and implementing comprehensive care management programs for pregnant women with substance use disorders.

NAS is a growing public health concern that can result in significant morbidity and mortality if not managed appropriately. Diagnosis and management of NAS require a multidisciplinary approach, involving obstetricians, neonatologists, nurses, and other healthcare providers. Prevention of NAS through comprehensive care management programs and substance use disorder treatment during pregnancy is essential to reducing the burden of this syndrome on families and healthcare systems.

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Received: 01-Feb-2023; **Manuscript No.** PTCR-23-22230; **Editor assigned:** 03-Feb-2023; **PreQC.** No. PTCR-23-22230 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 17-Feb-2023; **QC.** No. PTCR-23-22230; **Revised:** 24-Feb-2023; **Manuscript No.** PTCR-23-22230 (R); **Published:** 03-Mar-2023, DOI: 10.35841/2161-0665.23.13.497.

Citation: Veron D (2023) An Overview on Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome. *Pediatr Ther.* 13:497.

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