Thyroid Function Tests in the Newborn

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Childhood, 45, 374. Thyroid function tests in the newborn. The 131I tri-
iodothyronine (T3) resin uptake test reflects thyroid function more closely than other
acceptable tests currently available.

The T3 uptake and protein-bound iodine (PBI) level were estimated in 20 premature
and 20 full-term infants at birth and at the end of 1 week.

The full-term infant has normal adult values, whereas the premature baby has
results extending into the hyperthyroid range at birth, but these fall to within normal
limits at 1 week.

There are few studies of thyroid function in the
newborn and neonatal period of infants born
earlier than the 37th week of gestation. Protein-
bound iodine (PBI) levels are similar to those
obtained for full-term infants (Danowski et al.,
1950). The radioactive iodine (131I) uptake test
has limited value because of the risk from
irradiation.

The in vitro test of radioactive 131I-labelled tri-
iodothyronine uptake using red blood cells was
introduced by Hamolsky, Stein, and Freedberg
(1957). A similar test was used by later workers
using a resin substituted for red blood cells (Nava
This test measures the degree of saturation of
thyroid-binding globulin, whereas the PBI test
measures the protein-bound thyroid hormones
thyroxine, tri-iodothyronine, and iodotyrosine.

Comparison of this test with the conventional
PBI test in the neonatal period was made by Evans
(1966), using paired maternal and cord blood samples.
This work included very few premature infants.
We have therefore undertaken a study comparing
these two tests in premature and full-term infants.

Materials and Methods

Blood was obtained from the umbilical cord after
delivery of placenta or from a peripheral vein within
12 hours of birth for estimation of values and tri-
iodothyronine resin uptake values from 20 full-term
infants and 20 low birthweight infants (less than 37
weeks' gestation).

The tests were repeated on the 8th day of life.
Plasma-bound iodine was estimated by Auto-analysers.
The 131I tri-iodothyronine (T3) resin uptake test was
estimated after the method of Gimlette (1967). The
T3 adult euthyroid range is for this laboratory
70–140%.

The T3 test can now be performed on as little as
0.1 ml. plasma.

Results

The PBI levels in both the full-term and prematu-
re infants confirm the known high mean and wide ranges of cord blood, with even higher levels
at the end of the first week (Table). However, T3
resin uptake is normal for the full-term infants
both at birth and at the end of the first week.
The premature infants' cord results show a high
mean with a very wide range at birth, but by the
end of the first week these results also show a
normal mean and range.

The mean cord blood PBI in both term and
premature infants is at the upper limit of adult
normal euthyroid values (3.5 µg.–8.0 µg./100 ml.
plasma) (Perry, Hodgman, and Starr, 1965; Rose,

Both full-term (Danowski et al., 1950) and
premature infants (Chadd, Davies, and Gray, 1968)
showed a rise of the PBI values, above the upper
limit of adult euthyroid normal, 8 µg./100 ml.,
during the first week of life. Values of 10–14
µg./100 ml. were frequently obtained between
48 hours and 8 days of life by Chadd et al. (1968)
in premature infants. These values gradually fell
over the next 2–3 months.

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TABLE

Plasma Protein-bound Iodine Levels and T₃ Uptake Test in Newborn Infants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthweight (kg.)</th>
<th>Gestation (wk.)</th>
<th>Protein-bound Iodine at Birth (µg./100 ml.)</th>
<th>T₃ Uptake at Birth (%)</th>
<th>Protein-bound Iodine at 8 Days (µg./100 ml.)</th>
<th>T₃ Uptake at 8 Days (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>20 Premature</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>33-6</td>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>8-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>1.0-3.9*</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>5-4-11-2</td>
<td>62-227</td>
<td>5-9-12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>34.79</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>20 Full-term</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>9-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>2.5-3.9</td>
<td>36-41</td>
<td>6-1-13-8</td>
<td>70-160</td>
<td>8-9-14-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>32-8</td>
<td>3-16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*N.B. 1 premature diabetic infant included, but birthweight 3-9 kg., gestation—36 weeks.

The radioactive iodine (¹³¹I) test has been used to assess thyroid function in the neonatal period in both full-term infants (Van Middlesworth, 1954) and in premature infants (Martmer et al., 1956). Their results confirm the impression of transient hyperthyroidism in the neonatal period. This test is not widely used because of the risks of irradiation.

The raised PBI in the newborn may be due to oestrogen binding and falsely suggests increased thyroid activity. T₃ resin uptake test, however, measures the saturation of thyroid activity. Evans (1966) found in normal newborn infants mean cord blood PBI of 7.5 µg./100 ml., and 81% for the T₃ resin uptake test.

In term infants the T₃ resin uptake is well within the adult normal euthyroid range for our laboratory (70–140%), and is unchanged at the end of the first week of life.

The premature newborn infant, however, shows a raised T₃ uptake test at birth, which falls to within the normal euthyroid adult range (70–140%) by the end of the first week. This suggests that at birth the premature infant has a true increase in thyroid hormones.

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REFERENCES


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