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**REFERENCES**


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**Plasma and erythrocyte folate concentrations in normal mature infants**

Assessment of folate status in normal mature infants is a necessary preliminary to detailed investigation of abnormal conditions. There is evidence that maternal folate depletion is associated with intrauterine growth retardation (Hibbard and Hibbard, 1963) and also that infants of low birthweight show a tendency to develop folate depletion (Strelling et al., 1966).

Blood folate concentrations in the newborn infant are commonly higher than those in the mother (Grossowicz et al., 1960; Landon and Oxley, 1971). Several factors may influence these values, in particular prenatal administration of folic acid (Landon and Oxley, 1971). In most previous studies of folate status in infants, only serum or whole blood folate concentrations were measured (e.g. Grossowicz et al., 1960; Landon and Oxley, 1971).
Also, in series relating to predominantly normal infants, some of low birthweight were included and no distinction was drawn between pregnancies in which folic acid was taken prenatally by the mother and those in which no such therapy was taken (Roberts et al., 1969).

The following survey was undertaken to estimate the normal range of plasma and erythrocyte folate levels in normal mature infants.

Material

577 infants were investigated during the period June to October 1970. All were born in Mill Road Maternity Hospital and satisfied the following criteria. (a) They were normal liveborn infants of singleton pregnancies. (b) Gestation period was known with reasonable certainty and was within the range 259 to 293 days. (c) Birthweight was above the 10th centile for the gestation period (Thomson, Billewicz, and Hytten, 1968). (d) Details concerning maternal haematonic therapy were available.

All the women studied had received iron therapy and 436 had taken at least 500 µg folic acid daily for a period of more than 4 weeks before delivery.

Methods

Blood samples were obtained from the umbilical cord by venepuncture immediately after delivery. Plasma and erythrocyte folate concentrations were assessed by the methods of Herbert (1961) and Hoffbrand, Newcombe, and Mollin (1966). Using these methods plasma and erythrocyte folate values in normal adults are 3 to 19·9 ng/ml (mean 7·8 ng/ml, SE 0·34) and 130 to 650 ng/ml (mean 257 ng/ml, SE 9·6) respectively. Hb concentration was estimated spectrophotometrically after conversion to cyanhaemoglobin. Packed cell volume (PCV) was measured by microhaematocrit and the mean corpuscular Hb concentration (MCHC) was calculated.

Results

Plasma and erythrocyte folate levels. Plasma and erythrocyte folate levels were assayed on all specimens of umbilical cord blood. The values showed a skewed distribution and logarithmic values were found to be most satisfactory for statistical analysis. The differences in both plasma and erythrocyte folate in relation to maternal folic acid therapy were highly significant. (Plasma, t = 6·5566; P < 0·001; erythrocyte, t = 3·5325; P < 0·001).

Plasma and erythrocyte concentrations of folate in cord blood are shown in Table I. Hb concentration, PCV, and MCHC were measured in 560 samples of cord blood; the other 17 samples of blood contained clots, and the results are detailed in Table II. Student's 't' test confirms that there is no significant difference between the two groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. infants investigated</th>
<th>Plasma folate concentration (ng/ml)</th>
<th>Prenatal folate concentration (ng/ml)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean ± 2SD</td>
<td>Mean ± 2SD</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>321</td>
<td>128–838</td>
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<td>321</td>
<td>128–838</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>TABLE II</th>
<th>Hb concentration, packed cell volume, and mean corpuscular Hb concentration of cord blood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. cases investigated</td>
<td>Hb concentration (g/100 ml) Arithmetic mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Plasma and serum folate concentrations in normal newborn infants have been discussed previously by several authors including Landon and Oxley (1971). In these reports and in the present series a wide range of values is found. Grossowicz et al. (1960), Landon and Oxley (1971), and others measured whole blood folate concentrations in normal infants. However, such values are greatly influenced by PCV and do not provide precise assessment of folate status. Erythrocyte folate concentration provides a more significant assessment of folate status but this parameter has rarely been studied. Serum and erythrocyte folate levels in a group of 50 normal infants were studied by Roberts et al. (1969) who reported mean values which are higher than the results in the present series, but it is possible that most of the mothers received folic acid prenatally, and Landon and Oxley (1971) showed that such therapy resulted in relatively high infant folate levels.

In the present series prenatal administration of
folic acid resulted in significantly higher concentrations of both plasma and erythrocyte folate in newborn infants (Table I). However, high levels of blood folate do not necessarily imply clinical benefit and Hb concentration, PCV, and MCHC were similar in both groups (Table II), while none of the infants showed anaemia. The mothers who received no folic acid supplements prenatally were normal and showed no evidence of folate depletion, so that we conclude that folate levels in their infants (plasma folate—mean 11.9 ng/ml, range 3.8–36.6 ng/ml; erythrocyte folate—mean 321 ng/ml, range 128–838 ng/ml) can be regarded as normal for the mature newborn.

**Summary**

Plasma and erythrocyte folate levels in a group of normal mature newborn infants whose mothers had received a prenatal supplement of folic acid were compared with those from an untreated group. Infants in the treated group had significantly higher levels of both plasma and erythrocyte folate.

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**References**


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