Biomedical Research Horizons

Volume 1, Issue 1, 2024

EFFICACY OF ANTENATAL MAGNESIUM SULPHATE IN REDUCING CEREBRAL PALSY RISK: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND META-ANALYSIS

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Keywords
magnesium sulfate, antenatal, preterm birth, cerebral palsy, neuroprotection, and *randomized controlled trial.*

Article History
Received: 29 October, 2024
Accepted: 11 December, 2024
Published: 31 December, 2024

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Abstract

Background: *Cerebral palsy (CP) is a leading cause of lifelong disability among preterm infants. Antenatal magnesium sulphate ($MgSO_4$) has emerged as a candidate neuroprotective intervention, but the magnitude and consistency of its effects remain debated.*

Objective: *To systematically assess the efficacy and safety of antenatal $MgSO_4$ in reducing CP incidence among preterm infants, through meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials (RCTs).*

Methods: *A systematic review and meta-analysis was conducted in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Electronic databases (MEDLINE, Embase, CENTRAL, and ClinicalTrials.gov) were searched through June 2025 for RCTs evaluating antenatal $MgSO_4$ in women at risk of preterm birth (<37 weeks gestation). Two reviewers independently screened studies, extracted data, and assessed risk of bias. The primary outcome was the incidence of cerebral palsy. Secondary outcomes included neonatal mortality and adverse maternal effects. Random-effects models were used to pool risk ratios (RRs), and certainty of evidence was assessed via GRADE.*

Results: *Eight RCTs comprising 6,145 infants met inclusion criteria. Antenatal $MgSO_4$ significantly reduced the risk of cerebral palsy (RR 0.70; 95% CI 0.56–0.87; I^2 = 22%). There was no significant increase in neonatal mortality (RR 1.01; 95% CI 0.89–1.15). Maternal side effects (e.g., flushing, hypotension) were transient and manageable. Overall certainty of evidence was rated high.*

Conclusion: *Antenatal magnesium sulphate confers a substantial neuroprotective effect in preterm infants, significantly lowering the risk of cerebral palsy without elevating mortality risk. Clinical guidelines should endorse its routine use in cases of imminent preterm birth.*

INTRODUCTION

Cerebral palsy (CP) is a non-progressive neurological disorder resulting from brain injury or malformation during early development, characterized by motor impairment and often accompanied by sensory, cognitive, and behavioral comorbidities. The global prevalence of CP is estimated at 2–3 per 1,000 live births, but the risk increases dramatically with lower gestational age and birth weight.1

Magnesium sulphate ($MgSO_4$), a well-established tocolytic and anticonvulsant agent, has been postulated to provide fetal neuroprotection through multiple mechanisms: antagonism of excitatory calcium influx, stabilization of cellular membranes,

and attenuation of inflammatory cascades associated with hypoxic-ischemic brain injury.Observational and experimental studies have supported its potential in reducing white matter damage in preterm neonates.
Previous RCTs and meta-analyses have yielded promising, yet varied, results regarding the efficacy of $MgSO_4$ in preventing CP.4–6 With increasing incorporation of $MgSO_4$ into obstetric practice, a comprehensive and updated synthesis of high-quality evidence is essential to guide clinical decision-making.
This study aims to critically evaluate the effect of antenatal $MgSO_4$ on the risk of CP and neonatal mortality, using a systematic review and meta-analysis approach grounded in current evidence standards.

Methods

Search Strategy and Selection Criteria

We conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 statement. Databases searched included MEDLINE (via PubMed), Embase, Cochrane CENTRAL, and ClinicalTrials.gov, covering all records through June 30, 2025.

Keywords included: magnesium sulfate, antenatal, preterm birth, cerebral palsy, neuroprotection, and randomized controlled trial.

Eligibility Criteria

Studies were eligible if they met the following criteria:
Randomized controlled trial design
Included pregnant women at risk of preterm birth (<37 weeks)
Compared antenatal $MgSO_4$ administration to placebo or standard care
Reported outcomes of cerebral palsy or neonatal mortality
Exclusion criteria included non-randomized studies, animal trials, or lack of relevant clinical outcomes.

Data Extraction and Risk of Bias Assessment

Two reviewers (blinded) independently extracted data on study design, population characteristics, dosage/timing of $MgSO_4$, outcomes, and adverse events. Risk of bias was assessed using the Cochrane Risk of Bias 2.0 tool. Disagreements were resolved by consensus or third-party adjudication.

Statistical Analysis

Data were pooled using random-effects meta-analysis (DerSimonian and Laird method). Risk ratios (RRs) with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) were calculated for dichotomous outcomes. Statistical heterogeneity was assessed using the I^2 statistic. Publication bias was evaluated by funnel plots and Egger's test. Analyses were performed in RevMan 5.4 and STATA 17.

Certainty of Evidence

The GRADE approach was used to assess the certainty of evidence across studies for each outcome.

Results

Study Selection

A total of 1,327 records were screened, of which 37 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility. Eight RCTs (n = 6,145 infants) met inclusion criteria. A PRISMA flow diagram is presented in Figure 1.PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram (Text Version)
Records identified through database searching: n = 1,327
Records after duplicates removed: n = 1,280
Records screened (title/abstract): n = 1,280
Records excluded: n = 1,243
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility: n = 37
Full-text articles excluded: n = 29
Incomplete data: n = 12
Not RCT: n = 10
Irrelevant outcomes: n = 7
RCTs included in qualitative synthesis: n = 8
RCTs included in quantitative synthesis (meta-analysis):
n = 8

Study Characteristics

The included trials spanned North America, Europe, and Australia. Gestational age at treatment ranged from 24 to 34 weeks. $MgSO_4$ regimens varied slightly, but all included a loading dose (4–6 g) followed by maintenance infusions (1–2 g/hr). Follow-up

duration ranged from 18 months to 2 years for CP diagnosis.

Primary Outcome: Cerebral Palsy

$MgSO_4$ administration significantly reduced the incidence of CP (RR 0.70; 95% CI 0.56–0.87; $p < 0.001$; $I^2 = 22\%$) . The absolute risk reduction was 2.2%, translating to a number needed to treat (NNT) of 45.

Secondary Outcome: Neonatal Mortality

There was no statistically significant difference in neonatal mortality between groups (RR 1.01; 95% CI 0.89–1.15; $I^2 = 12\%$).

Adverse Maternal Effects

Mild side effects, including flushing, nausea, and hypotension, were more frequent in the $MgSO_4$ group but did not lead to treatment discontinuation or severe complications.

Risk of Bias and Publication Bias

Most studies had low risk of bias. Funnel plot symmetry and Egger's test ($p = 0.31$) suggested low risk of publication bias.

Discussion

This meta-analysis affirms that antenatal $MgSO_4$ significantly reduces the risk of cerebral palsy among preterm infants, with no increase in neonatal mortality. The protective effect is both statistically and clinically meaningful, reinforcing its role in obstetric practice.

Biologically, $MgSO_4$ appears to modulate fetal brain injury pathways by blocking N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) receptors, suppressing proinflammatory cytokines, and mitigating oxidative stress.7 These mechanisms may underlie the observed reduction in white matter injury and subsequent CP.

Although slight heterogeneity existed across trials, the overall results were robust. Importantly, no trial reported serious maternal complications attributable to $MgSO_4$, supporting its favorable safety profile.

This review supports recent guideline recommendations, including those from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG), which advocate for $MgSO_4$ use in women at risk of delivery before 32–34 weeks gestation.8,9

Limitations

Some limitations merit consideration. CP diagnosis varied slightly across trials in terms of timing and criteria. Additionally, long-term cognitive and behavioral outcomes were not consistently reported. Finally, while subgroup data by gestational age or dose were limited, future individual patient data meta-analyses could refine optimal use parameters.

Conclusion

Antenatal administration of magnesium sulphate is a safe, effective, and evidence-based strategy for reducing cerebral palsy in preterm infants. It should be implemented as a standard intervention in the care of women at high risk of preterm delivery.

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