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Maternal Immunity and its Protective Role against Enteric Viral Infections in Offspring

Zephyr Wren*

Department of Pathology, University of Rijeka, Croatia

DESCRIPTION

Maternal immunity plays a crucial role in protecting offspring from infectious diseases during the early stages of life. This protective effect is particularly significant in the context of enteric viral infections, which can lead to severe morbidity in young children. The transfer of maternal antibodies, primarily through placental transfer and breastfeeding, provides a vital line of defense against viral pathogens. Importantly, recent research suggests that maternal immunity can offer this protection without negatively impacting the development of humoral immune memory in offspring, allowing for a balanced immune response. During pregnancy, mothers produce antibodies, predominantly immunoglobulin G (IgG), which are transferred to the fetus through the placenta. This transplacental transfer equips the newborn with a reservoir of maternal antibodies that can neutralize viruses upon exposure. For instance, studies have shown that maternal antibodies can effectively protect against viruses such as rotavirus and norovirus, both of which are leading causes of gastroenteritis in infants. By neutralizing these pathogens in the gastrointestinal tract, maternal antibodies help to prevent infection and reduce the severity of disease in young children. Following birth, breastfeeding further enhances this protective effect. Human breast milk contains a rich array of immunological factors, including antibodies (especially secretory immunoglobulin A, or IgA), cytokines, and immune cells that actively support the infant's developing immune system. These components provide localized protection in the gut, which is critical for preventing enteric infections. Moreover, breast milk not only delivers passive immunity but also stimulates the infant's own immune responses, promoting the development of their immune system. One of the most compelling aspects of maternal immunity is that it does not hinder the development of the infant's own humoral immune memory. Instead, maternal antibodies can coexist with the infant's immune responses, facilitating a harmonious balance. Research indicates that while maternal antibodies can inhibit certain vaccine responses during the first few months of life, they do not interfere with the overall capacity for the infant to mount a robust immune response when exposed to pathogens or vaccines. This suggests that the presence of maternal antibodies provides immediate protection without compromising the long-term development of adaptive immunity. The phenomenon known as maternal antibody interference can sometimes affect the timing and effectiveness of vaccinations in infants, particularly for live-attenuated vaccines. However, it is crucial to note that this interference is generally transient. As maternal antibodies waned over time, infants can effectively respond to vaccines, developing their own immune memory. This memory formation is essential for long-term protection against infections, ensuring that the infant can generate an appropriate immune response upon subsequent exposures to pathogens. In addition to antibodies, maternal factors also influence the development of the infant's gut microbiome, which plays a significant role in immune development. The initial colonization of the gut by beneficial bacteria, often derived from the mother during birth and breastfeeding, contributes to shaping the immune landscape of the offspring. A healthy gut microbiome is crucial for training the immune system and enhancing its ability to respond effectively to infections, including enteric viruses. Despite the protective benefits of maternal immunity, it is essential to consider the broader implications of maternal health during pregnancy.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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Corresponding author Zephyr Wren, Department of Pathology, University of Rijeka, Croatia, E-mail: ZephyrWren2666@yahoo.com

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