Normogram of Middle Cerebral Artery Doppler Indexes and Cerebroplacental Ratio at 12 to 14 Weeks in an Unselected Pregnancy Population

Reem S. Abu-Rustum, MD, FACOG, FACS, FAIUM¹ M. Fouad Ziade, PhD² Ibrahim Ghosn, MD³
Nabil Helou, MD⁴

¹ Division of Maternal Fetal Medicine, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida
² Faculty of Public Health, Lebanese University, Tripoli, Lebanon
³ Department of Radiology, Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon
⁴ Department of Radiology, Aboujaoude Hospital, Jal El Dib, Lebanon

Address for correspondence Reem S. Abu-Rustum, MD, FACOG, FACS, FAIUM, Division of Maternal Fetal Medicine, Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology, University of Florida, Box 100294, Gainesville, Fl 32610 (e-mail: rar@cfafc.org).

Abstract

Objective The aim of this study is to assess the feasibility of visualizing the middle cerebral artery (MCA), establishing the normogram for MCA pulsatility index (PI) and peak systolic velocity (PSV), and calculating cerebroplacental ratio (CPR) at 12 to 14 weeks.

Study Design Prospective cross-sectional study on 186 gravidas presenting for nuchal translucency (NT) assessment. Maternal body mass index (BMI), fetal crown-rump length (CRL), biparietal diameter (BPD), and NT were obtained. Color Doppler was utilized to visualize the MCA and measure PI, PSV, and umbilical artery PI. Normograms for MCA PI and PSV, and for CPR, were constructed. Regression analysis was used for the reference range of MCA PI and CPR according to CRL and BPD. Chi-square and t-test were utilized. p-Value of < 0.05 was considered significant.

Results MCA was successfully visualized in 176/186 (94.6%), PI and PSV measured on 148/186 (79.6%) and 145/186 (78.0%), respectively, and CPR calculated in 133/186 (71.5%). There was no significant effect of BMI, CRL, or BPD on successful assessment of MCA or CPR. Normograms for MCA PI and CPR revealed no significant relation with CRL or BPD.

Conclusion MCA and CPR assessment is feasible at 12 to 14 weeks. A reference range for MCA Doppler indexes and CPR at 12 to 14 weeks has been established. This may prove helpful in the early evaluation of fetuses identified as at-risk for adverse neonatal outcome.

Keywords ► middle cerebral artery ► first trimester scan ► pulsatility index ► peak systolic velocity ► cerebroplacental ratio

With the technological advances and the rise in the role of a full fetal anatomic scan at the time of nuchal translucency (NT) assessment,¹ ² there has been an increase in emerging data on various screening markers, particularly those for the early detection of congenital heart defects (CHDs): NT, tricuspid regurgitation, ductus venosus flow, and most recently the cardiac axis.³ ⁵ Recent studies suggest that the brain sparing effect, first described in CHD by Donofrio et al.,¹⁰ may be evident as early as the first trimester in fetuses with CHD. We have previously shown that fetuses with CHD, particularly those with hypoplastic left heart syndrome, may manifest a decrease in head volume as early as the first trimester.¹¹ This may potentially imply impaired neurodevelopment.

The earliest studies on the fetal cerebral circulation, by Wladimiroff et al in 1986, provided evidence in support of the presence of the brain sparing effect in case of fetal hypoxemia.¹² Since then, several studies have evaluated the fetal circulation, as early as 10 weeks: in the 1990s, Wladimiroff et al evaluated fetal arterial flow velocities¹³ ¹⁴ and fetal heart rate and flow velocity variability;¹⁵ in 2002, Matias et al performed full first trimester fetal hemodynamic evaluation;¹⁶ in 2007, Tongson et al established the peak
systolic velocity (PSV) of the middle cerebral artery (MCA) in
healthy fetuses between 11 and 22 weeks,\textsuperscript{17} and Ruijwet-
pongstorn and Phupong evaluated Doppler indexes of the
MCA in healthy fetuses at 11 to 20 weeks.\textsuperscript{18}

The cerebroplacental ratio (CPR) is the ratio of the pulsa-
tility index (PI) of the MCA to the PI of the umbilical artery (UA).
It was first described by Gramellini et al in 1992 as a more
sensitive predictor of adverse perinatal outcome, at 30 to
41 weeks, with an accuracy of 90\% when compared with either
the MCA (78.8\%) or UA (83.3\%).\textsuperscript{19} The CPR reflects acute
changes in partial pressure of oxygen.\textsuperscript{20} In 2003, Baschat and
Gembruch reevaluated the CPR in normal fetuses between 20
and 40 weeks of gestation and constructed the reference
ranges.\textsuperscript{20} To date, we are not aware of the availability of
reference values for the CPR in the first trimester. As such,
this study was designed to assess the feasibility of visualizing
the MCA, establishing the normogram for MCA PI and PSV, and
developing CPR normograms at 12 to 14 weeks of gestation in
an unselected pregnancy population.

\section*{Study Design}
This was a prospective cross-sectional study, approved by the
Institutional Review Board, on 200 gravidas with spontaneous
conception of singleton gestations, presenting for NT assess-
ment between 12w0d and 13w6d at two centers in Lebanon
and with an NT < 95th centile for gestational age. All patients
were properly dated by an early scan. Maternal body mass
index (BMI), fetal crown-rump length (CRL), biparietal dia-
meter (BPD), and NT were measured. At our centers, a full
anatomic scan is performed at the time of NT assessment.
Fetuses with any structural abnormalities, in utero fetal
demise, and those without a confirmed outcome of a healthy
neonate were excluded from the analysis. All exams were
performed transabdominally by two experienced sonologists
using 4 to 8 MHz convex high-resolution probes with two-
dimensional and three-dimensional capabilities (GE Voluson
E8 ultrasound systems, Kretz, Zimpf, Austria). For the identi-
fication of the MCA, the plane of BPD, caudal to the thalamus,
was obtained and first trimester cardiac presents, using color
Doppler with high-definition flow, were utilized \textsuperscript{(Fig. 1)}.

Subsequently, the MCA PI and PSV were measured at the
proximal one-third of the MCA with an angle of insonation
of < 10\°. The UA was identified, using the same presets and
color Doppler with high-definition flow, and the PI was mea-
sured in a free loop of cord. We employed the As Low As
Reasonably Achievable principle\textsuperscript{21} maintaining a thermal
index of < 1 and minimizing scanning time with color and
pulse wave Doppler to less than 2 minutes as per the American
Institute of Ultrasound in Medicine\textsuperscript{22} and International Society
of Ultrasound in Obstetrics & Gynecology\textsuperscript{23} safety recom-
mandations. The CPR was calculated as the ratio of the PI of the MCA
to the PI of the UA. The normograms for the MCA PI and CPR
were constructed. Regression analysis approach and different
polynomial degrees (second and third) were used to study the
reference range of the MCA PI and CPR according to CRL and
BPD. The normogram for the MCA PSV was determined using
 crude data and compared with what has been established in a
Thai population. Chi-square and t-test were utilized. A p-value
of < 0.05 was considered significant.

\section*{Results}
A total of 186 fetuses were included in our final analysis
\textsuperscript{(Fig. 2)}. Maternal and fetal characteristics are summarized in
\textsuperscript{Table 1}. The MCA was successfully visualized in 176/186
(94.6\%) of fetuses. The MCA PI and PSV were obtained on
148/186 (79.6\%) and 145/186 (78.0\%) fetuses, respectively.

There was no significant effect of maternal BMI, fetal CRL, or
BPD on successful visualization of the MCA \textsuperscript{(Table 2)}. The
normogram for the MCA PI in our population was established
according to gestational age as well as CRL categories \textsuperscript{(Table 3)}.
The mean PI values at a gestational age of 12 weeks (2.56) and at
13 weeks (2.37) obtained in this study were comparable
to previously published data by Ruijwetpongstorn and Phu-
pong in 2007\textsuperscript{18} at a gestational age of 12 weeks (2.55) and at
13 weeks (2.30) with no significant difference \((p = 0.999) and
p = 0.630, respectively). The reference range of the MCA PI
according to CRL \textsuperscript{(Fig. 3)} and BPD \textsuperscript{(Fig. 4)} was determined.
There was no significant relation between MCA PI with CRL
\((p = 0.065) and between MCA PI with BPD \((p = 0.195), with a
best fitted linear regression modeling yield of: MCA PI = 3.541
to 0.017 CRL \((R^2 = 0.023) and MCA PI = 2.57 to 0.0065 CRL
0.035 BPD \((R^2 = 0.011), respectively. The normogram for the
MCA PSV in our population was established and it was com-
parable to what has previously been published by Tongsong
et al\textsuperscript{17} and Ruijwetpongstorn and Phupong\textsuperscript{18} \textsuperscript{(Fig. 5)}.

The UA was successfully measured and CPR calculated in
133/186 (71.5\%) of cases. The normogram for the CPR in our
population was established according to the gestational age
as well as CRL categories \textsuperscript{(Table 4)}, and the reference range of the
CPR according to CRL \textsuperscript{(Fig. 6)} and BPD \textsuperscript{(Fig. 7)} was
determined. There was no significant effect of BMI, CRL, or
BPD on successful assessment of the CPR \textsuperscript{(Table 5)}. In
addition, there was no significant relation between CPR
and CRL \((p = 0.778), or CPR with BPD \((p = 0.130), with a
best fitted linear regression modeling yield of: CPR = 0.832
to 0.002 CRL \((R^2 = 0.023) and CPR = 0.285 to 0.031 BPD
\((R^2 = 0.130), respectively.
Discussion

As our data demonstrate, it is possible to visualize the MCA in 176/186 (94.6%) of cases at the time of NT assessment. There seems to be no impact of maternal BMI, fetal CRL, or BPD on successful visualization, keeping in mind the low BMI in our patient population (mean, 24.5 kg/m²).

We have been able to establish the normogram for the MCA PI at 12 to 14 weeks in our unselected pregnancy population (►Table 3). In addition, we have established the normogram for the MCA PSV and it is comparable to what has already been established by Tongsong et al and Rujiwetpong-storn and Phupong in a Thai population¹⁷,¹⁸ (►Fig. 5). There is no significant relationship between MCA PI and fetal CRL or BPD. It is important to note that there has been inconsistency in various studies as to where the MCA Doppler indexes are measured: we chose the proximal one-third as did both Tongsong et al and Rujiwetpongstorn and Phupong in a Thai population.¹⁷,¹⁸ This was not the case in the second trimester with Baschat and Gembruch.²⁰

The CPR was successfully calculated in 133/186 (71.5%) of cases and the normogram established. As with the MCA PI, there was no significant relationship between the CPR and fetal CRL or BPD. This is consistent with what has been shown in the second trimester by Baschat and Gembruch:²⁰ our data show that the CPR is not constant between 12 and 14 weeks. In contrast to a CPR greater than 1.08 in second trimester normal fetuses,²⁰ the CPR may be less than 1 at 12 to 14 weeks (►Table 4). This may be attributed to the high UA PI in early gestation and the typical absence of end-diastolic flow prior to 13 weeks.¹⁶ By a gestational age of 13 weeks, the 50th centile for the CPR approaches 1 (►Table 4). As such, the examiner should be mindful to the fact that the CPR tends to be less than 1 in normal fetuses prior to 13 weeks.

The strength of our study is that it is prospective in nature and we have a large cohort of patients: 186 patients at 12 to 14 weeks with a confirmed outcome of a normal neonate in comparison to prior studies involving first trimester fetuses. The two previous studies in a Thai population included 410 and 149 patients, respectively; however, they were spread out between 11 and 22 weeks.¹⁷,¹⁸

Table 3 Normogram of calculated MCA PI at the 5th, 10th, 50th, 90th, and 95th percentiles for each gestational age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GA (wk)</th>
<th>5th</th>
<th>10th</th>
<th>50th</th>
<th>90th</th>
<th>95th</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>3.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRL categories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 65 mm</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[65–70] mm</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[70–75] mm</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 75 mm</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.45</td>
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</table>

Table 2 Successful visualization of MCA by maternal and fetal parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MCA not seen</th>
<th>MCA seen</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Standard deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal BMI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fetal CRL (mm)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fetal BPD (mm)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: BMI, body mass index; BPD, biparietal diameter; CRL, crown-rump length; GA, gestational age; NT, nuchal translucency; MCA, middle cerebral artery; PI, pulsatility index.
Fig. 3  Regression analysis of the middle cerebral artery (MCA) pulsatility index (PI) by crown-rump length (CRL).

Fig. 4  Regression analysis of the middle cerebral artery (MCA) pulsatility index (PI) by biparietal diameter (BPD).

Fig. 5  The normogram for middle cerebral artery (MCA) peak systolic velocity (PSV) by gestational age (GA) in comparison with Tongsong et al and Rujiwetpongstorm and Phupong.
**Table 4** Normogram of calculated CPR at the 5th, 10th, 50th, 90th, and 95th percentiles for each gestational age and CRL categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GA (wk)</th>
<th>CPR 5th</th>
<th>CPR 10th</th>
<th>CPR 50th</th>
<th>CPR 90th</th>
<th>CPR 95th</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>2.23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRL categories</th>
<th>CPR 5th</th>
<th>CPR 10th</th>
<th>CPR 50th</th>
<th>CPR 90th</th>
<th>CPR 95th</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 65 mm</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>2.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[65–70] mm</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>2.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[70–75] mm</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>1.99</td>
<td>3.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 75 mm</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: CPR, cerebroplacental ratio; CRL, crown-rump length; GA, gestational age.

**Table 5** Successful calculation of CPR by maternal and fetal parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CPR not calculated</th>
<th>CPR calculated</th>
<th>p-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td><strong>Mean</strong></td>
<td><strong>Standard deviation</strong></td>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal BMI (kg/m²)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>24.68</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fetal CRL (mm)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>68.27</td>
<td>7.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fetal BPD (mm)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>22.04</td>
<td>2.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: BMI, body mass index; BPD, biparietal diameter; CPR, cerebroplacental ratio; CRL, crown-rump length.

**Fig. 6** Regression analysis of cerebroplacental ratio (CPR) by crown-rump length (CRL).

**Fig. 7** Regression analysis of cerebroplacental ratio (CPR) by biparietal diameter (BPD).
In addition, our data are further validated by the fact that with our larger numbers, the results in our unselected Lebanese population are comparable to what has already been established with respect to both the MCA PI and PSV in a Thai population. It is noteworthy that both studies from Thailand, as ours, were cross-sectional studies.17,18

Our study has several limitations. Given Doppler indexes at the proximal one-third of the MCA are less likely to be affected by fetal behavioral status as described by Clerici et al in 2002,24 we chose to measure the MCA Doppler indexes at the proximal one-third of the MCA, an area where they may be lower than at the middle and distal third.25 Furthermore, we did not evaluate maternal uterine artery Doppler indexes and their potential effect on fetal perfusion and the CPR.

In conclusion, MCA evaluation is feasible at the time of NT assessment. To our knowledge, our study is the first to provide a reference range for MCA Doppler indexes and CPR at 12 to 14 weeks. Having established normograms for MCA Doppler assessment, to our knowledge, our study is the first to provide a reference range for MCA Doppler indexes at 12 to 14 weeks. Having established normograms for MCA Doppler indexes and CPR at 12 to 14 weeks may prove helpful, when indicated, in the early assessment of at-risk fetuses identified by abnormal uterine artery Doppler studies, maternal risk factors, those at risk for anemia, growth restriction, and impending demise, among others. Larger prospective studies are needed to examine the potential role of the MCA Doppler indexes and CPR as first trimester modalities in the evaluation of fetuses at risk for adverse neonatal outcome.

Note
This article has been presented as two oral abstract presentations at the AIUM Annual Convention in Orlando, Florida, in March 2017.

Conflict of Interest
None.

References
6 Timmerman E, Clur SA, Pajkrt E, Bilardo CM. First-trimester measurement of the ductus venosus pulsatility index and the prediction of congenital heart defects. Ultrasound Obstet Gynecol 2010;36(06):668–675