

Title:

Efficient maternofetal transplacental transfer of anti- SARS-CoV-2 spike antibodies after antenatal SARS-CoV-2 BNT162b2 mRNA vaccination

Authors:

Amihai Rottenstreich, MD¹, Gila Zarbiv, RN, CNM¹, Esther Oiknine-Djian, PhD², Roy Zigran, MD¹, Dana G. Wolf, MD², Shay Porat, MD¹

¹Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center, Jerusalem, Israel.

²Clinical virology unit, Department of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases, Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center, Jerusalem, Israel.

Disclosure statement:

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Funding:

No external funding was used for this study.

Corresponding Authors:

Amihai Rottenstreich, MD, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center, POB 12000, Jerusalem, Israel, 91120. Tel: ++972-2-6779415; Fax ++972-2-6449580. amichaimd@hadassah.org.il

Dana G. Wolf, MD, Clinical Virology Unit, Department of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases, Hadassah-Hebrew University Medical Center, Jerusalem, Israel, 91120

Tel: ++972-2-6777890; Fax: ++972-2-6427921 e-mail: dana.wolf@ekmd.huji.ac.il

Word count-1168 words. **Abstract**-277 words.

Running title: Transplacental transfer of anti- SARS-CoV-2 antibodies after antenatal mRNA vaccination

NOTE: This preprint reports new research that has not been certified by peer review and should not be used to guide clinical practice.

Abstract

Background:

Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) during pregnancy and early infancy can result in severe disease. Evaluating the serologic response after maternal vaccination during pregnancy and subsequent transplacental antibody transfer has important implications for maternal care and vaccination strategies.

Objective

To assess maternal and neonatal SARS-CoV-2 antibody levels after antenatal mRNA vaccination.

Design, Setting, and Participants

This study took place at Hadassah Medical Center in Jerusalem, Israel in February 2021. Maternal and cord blood sera were collected for antibody measurement from mother/newborn dyads following antenatal vaccination.

Exposure SARS-CoV-2 BNT162b2 mRNA vaccination.

Main outcome and measures Spike protein (S) and receptor binding domain (RBD)-specific, IgG levels were evaluated in maternal and cord blood sera.

Results The study cohort consisted of 20 parturients, with a median maternal age of 32 years and a median gestational age of 39^{3/7} weeks at the time of delivery. The median time lapsed from the first and second doses of vaccine administration until delivery was 33 [IQR 30-37] and 11 [IQR 9-15] days, respectively. Of the 20 dyads, all women and infants were positive for anti S- and anti-RBD-specific IgG. Anti-S and anti-RBD-specific IgG levels in maternal sera were positively correlated to their respective concentrations in cord blood ($\rho_s = 0.72$; $P < 0.001$ and $\rho_s = 0.72$; $P < 0.001$, respectively). Anti-S and anti-RBD-specific IgG titers in cord blood were directly correlated with time lapsed since the administration of the first vaccine dose ($\rho_s = 0.71$; $P = 0.001$ and $\rho_s = 0.63$; $P = 0.004$, respectively).

Conclusion and Relevance In this study, SARS-CoV-2 mRNA vaccine administered during pregnancy induced adequate maternal serologic response with subsequent efficient transplacental transfer. Our findings highlight that vaccination of pregnant women may provide maternal and neonatal protection from SARS-CoV-2 infection.

Keywords – pregnancy; vaccination; cord blood; serology; SARS-CoV-2.

Introduction

The rapidly emerging severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has afflicted over 113 million individuals resulting in over 2.5 million deaths, since it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 2020. The pressing need for effective tools to combat Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) has led to the accelerated development and recent approval of several targeted vaccines including two novel mRNA-based vaccines [1, 2]. A mass vaccination campaign using the BNT162b2 mRNA vaccine has commenced in Israel in December 2020.

Pregnant women are at higher risk for COVID-19 related illness [3, 4]. In addition, recent data show that severe SARS-CoV-2 infection is more common among infants as compared to older children [4, 5]. Nevertheless, as pregnant women were excluded from the pivotal trials evaluating the aforementioned vaccines [1, 2], their safety and efficacy in the setting of pregnancy remain unknown.

Despite these uncertainties and given the risk for severe disease course, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and other agencies support offering pregnant women to receive the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine following shared decision making [6, 7]. Due to the paucity of literature and the high clinical relevance, we aimed to investigate the maternal serologic response after SARS-CoV-2 vaccination during pregnancy and its related subsequent transplacental antibody transfer.

Methods

Study Population

A prospective study following women admitted for delivery was performed in February 2021 at Hadassah Medical Center, a university affiliated hospital in Jerusalem, Israel. Women who received two doses of SARS-CoV-2 BNT162b2 mRNA vaccine during pregnancy were eligible for this study. Demographic and clinical data, were collected at the time of

enrollment. The institutional review board of the Hadassah Medical Center approved this study (HMO-0064-21).

Laboratory Methods

Following delivery, maternal and cord blood sera were collected for antibody measurement. Spike protein (S) (Liaison SARS-CoV-2 S1/S2 IgG, DiaSorin, Saluggia, Italy) and receptor binding domain (RBD)- specific (Architect SARS-CoV-2 IgG II Quant assay, Abbott Diagnostics, Chicago, USA), IgG levels were evaluated in maternal and cord blood sera. Maternal and cord blood sera were also tested for SARS-CoV-2 IgM (Liaison, DiaSorin, Saluggia, Italy).

Statistical analysis

Patient characteristics are described as proportions for categorical variables and medians and interquartile range (IQR) for continuous variables without a normal distribution. Antibody levels and placental transfer ratios are expressed as medians and IQR. Correlations were reported using the Spearman's test with the correspondent ρ_s and P values. The data were analyzed using Software Package for Statistics and Simulation (IBM SPSS version 24, IBM Corp, Armonk, NY).

Results

During the study period, 20 parturients who received two doses of SARS-CoV-2 BNT162b2 mRNA vaccine were approached and agreed to participate. Median maternal age was 32 [IQR 28-37] years with a median gestational age of 39^{3/7} [IQR 38^{2/7}-40^{5/7}] weeks at the time of delivery. The median time lapsed from the first and second doses of vaccine administration until delivery was 33 [IQR 30-37] and 11 [IQR 9-15] days, respectively.

Of the 20 dyads, all women and infants were positive for anti-S- and anti-RBD-specific IgG. SARS-CoV-2 IgM antibodies were detected in 6 (30.0%) parturients, and were not detectable in any of the infants. Median SARS-CoV-2 anti-S and anti-RBD-specific IgG concentrations in maternal sera were 319 [IQR 211-1033] and 11150 [IQR 6154-17575] AU/mL, and 193 [IQR 111-260] and 3494 [IQR 1817-6163] AU/mL in cord blood, respectively.

The median placental transfer ratios of anti-S and anti-RBD specific IgG were 0.44 [IQR 0.25-0.61] and 0.34 [IQR 0.27-0.56], respectively.

SARS-CoV-2 anti-S and anti-RBD-specific IgG levels in maternal sera were positively correlated to their respective concentrations in cord blood ($\rho_s = 0.72$; $P < 0.001$ and $\rho_s = 0.72$; $P < 0.001$, respectively; Figure 1A, B). In addition, SARS-CoV-2 anti-S and anti-RBD-specific IgG titers in cord blood were directly correlated with increasing time since the first mRNA vaccine dose ($\rho_s = 0.71$; $P = 0.001$ and $\rho_s = 0.63$; $P = 0.004$, respectively; Figure 1C, D).

Discussion

We measured SARS-CoV-2 anti-S and anti-RBD IgG in 20 mother/newborn dyads at a single center in Israel, following antenatal SARS-CoV-2 BNT162b2 mRNA vaccination. IgG antibodies were detected in all 20 maternal and cord blood sera. The current study finding may support the role of vaccination of pregnant women to induce both maternal and neonatal immunity.

Currently, there is lack of data regarding SARS-CoV-2 vaccination among pregnant women in terms of safety and efficacy. In addition, the degree of transplacental passive immunity induced by maternal SARS-CoV-2 vaccination is unestablished. In this regard, studies among pregnant women with SARS-CoV-2 infection reported conflicting results [8, 9], with some suggesting compromised transplacental transfer of naturally acquired antibodies [9], questioning the potential role of vaccination during pregnancy to confer neonatal protection against COVID-19.

Neonatal protection from infections is primarily dependent on maternally-derived, transplacentally acquired antibodies. We demonstrated an efficient placental transfer of IgG antibodies following maternal SARS-CoV-2 vaccination, and a positive correlation between maternal and cord blood antibody concentrations. Nevertheless, while neonatal antibody levels were satisfactory, placental transfer ratios were relatively lower as compared to prior studies of vaccine-elicited antibodies to influenza, pertussis, measles, rubella and hepatitis B, in which transfer ratios ranging from 0.8 to 1.7 have been reported [10, 11]. This concurs with a recent study among pregnant women with COVID-19 which also demonstrated diminished transplacental transfer of anti-SARS-CoV-2 IgG [9]. The mechanisms underlying this finding should be further investigated.

While the current study findings are promising, there are several questions which remain unanswered. First, the optimal timing for maternal vaccination is still unclear. In the current study, maternal and neonatal antibody levels were directly correlated to the time lapsed from vaccination, which is consistent with studies of respiratory syncytial virus vaccine given during pregnancy [12]. However, as all women in the current cohort were vaccinated during the third-trimester, whether earlier vaccination would result in similar antibody concentrations requires further evaluation. Based on the kinetics of the serologic response observed in pregnant women with COVID-19 and in non-pregnant subjects who received the SARS-CoV-2 mRNA vaccine, some authors have suggested that maternal vaccination during the early second trimester may be the most ideal time to confer adequate maternal and neonatal immunity [12]. In addition, the durability of maternally-derived neonatal antibodies and the role of breastfeeding to further maintain neonatal immunity are other unsolved issues. Finally, larger studies are warranted to better assess the safety and efficacy of the different SARS-CoV-2 vaccines in the setting of pregnancy.

This study has several caveats, including its small sample size and single-site nature. In addition, the association between gestational age at delivery with transplacental transfer requires further investigation. Moreover, as previously stated, the effect of SARS-CoV-2 vaccination at different times throughout gestation remains to be explored.

Our findings demonstrate that antenatal SARS-CoV-2 vaccination induces an adequate maternal serologic response and has the potential to provide neonatal protection through transplacental transfer of vaccine-stimulated maternally-derived antibodies. These encouraging results have important implications for maternal care and the development of appropriate vaccination strategies. Further studies will be needed to better delineate the safety and efficacy of the different maternal SARS-CoV-2 vaccines available and better define transplacental antibody dynamics at earlier gestational ages.

Authors' contributions:

Dr Rottenstreich had full access to all of the data in the study and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

Concept and design: Porat, Rottenstreich, Wolf.

Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data: All authors.

Drafting of the manuscript: Rottenstreich, Zigron, Zarbiv, Porat, Wolf.

Laboratory analyses: Oiknine-Djian, Wolf.

Statistical analysis: Rottenstreich.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Additional Contributions:

We thank Dr. Doron Kabiri, Dr. Shlomi Yahalomi, Prof. Yosef Ezra, Dr. Gali Gordon, Dr. Naama Lessens and Dr. Roy Alter for their assistance in patients' enrollment. We also thank Rimma Barsuk and Yulia Yachnin for their technical assistance..

Conflict of interest:

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Funding:

No external funding was used for this study.

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Legends for figure-

Figure 1

SARS-CoV-2 anti-S (A) and anti-RBD-specific (B) IgG levels in maternal sera were positively correlated to their respective concentrations in cord blood ($\rho_s = 0.72$; $P < 0.001$ and $\rho_s = 0.72$; $P < 0.001$, respectively). SARS-CoV-2 anti-S (C) and anti-RBD-specific (D) IgG titers in cord blood were directly correlated with increasing time since the first mRNA vaccine dose ($\rho_s = 0.71$; $P = 0.001$ and $\rho_s = 0.63$; $P = 0.004$, respectively). Correlations, as well as correspondent ρ_s and P values were calculated by Spearman's test, as shown in each panel. The dotted lines are the 95% confidence intervals.

