

Extreme Prematurity: Diagnosis and Management

Background

Extreme prematurity is associated with increased morbidity and mortality. Factors that affect survival rates for extremely premature infants (gestational age below 26 weeks) include:

-Gestational age is the major factor in determining viability; however, there is a significant margin of error (e. g., few days to two weeks) in the estimation of gestational age using either prenatal or postnatal assessment tools.

-Other factors that affect survival rate include birth weight at a given gestational age, gender, plurality, and the use of antenatal corticosteroid therapy.

Significant morbidities of extremely premature survivors include severe intraventricular hemorrhage (ie, grade III and IV), periventricular leukomalacia, necrotizing enterocolitis, bronchopulmonary dysplasia, severe retinopathy of prematurity (ie, \geq Stage 3), late-onset infection, and neurodevelopmental impairment. Other than retinopathy of prematurity that requires surgical intervention, there is little overall variation in the morbidity rates based on gestational age among extremely premature survivors.

A web-based tool from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) is available to estimate outcome based on gestational age, birth weight at a given gestational age, gender, plurality, and the use of antenatal corticosteroid therapy (http://www.nichd.nih.gov/about/org/der/branches/ppb/programs/epbo/Pages/epbo_case.aspx).

This tool provides a range of possible outcomes and should not be the sole basis for parental counseling and clinical decision making.

Ethical Principles

Autonomy: respecting an individual's right to make decisions that affect his or her life

Beneficence: acting so as to benefit others

Nonmaleficence: avoiding harm to others

Justice: treating people truthfully and fairly*

Parents fill this role for the fetus and need relevant, accurate, and honest information about the risks and benefits of each treatment options. Even after meeting with parents, uncertainty about fetal condition, actual gestational age, likelihood of survival, and the potential for severe disabilities may make it difficult for the parents to decide before the delivery what is in their baby's best interest. In rare cases, the health care team may conclude that a decision made by a parent is not reasonable and is not in the baby's best interest and further consultation is necessary.

Situations in which it may be ethical to not initiate resuscitation.

Resuscitation may not be indicated in cases with gestational age, birth weight and congenital anomalies are associated with almost certain death or unacceptably high morbidity is likely. This may also occur in specific cases to comply with parental request. (See NICHD Survival Calculator)

*While not in the primary screen, one may also want to consider the 'justice' of allocation of resources in cases of low likelihood of survival.

Examples of cases where non-initiation of resuscitation may be appropriate

- Confirmed EGA less than 22 weeks
- Anencephaly
- Confirmed lethal aneuploidy or malformation
- When available data support an unacceptably high likelihood of death or severe disability

Management:

A.) Delivery not imminent

1.) Consultation with an obstetrician and a pediatrician to include:

Primary consideration should be what is best for the newborn considering*

- 1) The chance that the therapy will succeed
- 2) The risks of treatment and non-treatment
- 3) The degree that if successful the therapy will extend life
- 4) The pain and discomfort associated with the therapy
- 5) The anticipated quality of life for the newborn with and without treatment

(See ELBW morbidity & mortality data below from: Periviable birth. Obstetric Care Consensus No. 6. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Obstet Gynecol 2017;130:e187–9)

*AMA Code of Medical Ethics

- 2.) Consider tocolysis, antenatal steroids, neuroprotection, cerclage, or expectant management
- 3.) Exceptions may be made at the discretion of the attending clinician if there is additional evidence that significantly worsens the prognosis (e. g., certain congenital anomalies or profound growth restriction).
- 4.) Offer hospice care if appropriate

B.) Factors necessitating delivery

A.) Signs of incomplete abortion, partial delivery, active labor, hemorrhage
-tissue presenting outside the cervix
-prolapsed cord, fetal parts
-labor
-marked hemorrhage

B.) Signs of chorioamnionitis

Maternal fever ≥ 38 degrees C (≥ 100.4 F)

Plus one of the following:

- Maternal leukocytosis (greater than 15,000 cells/mm³)
- Maternal tachycardia (greater than 100 beats/minute)
- Fetal tachycardia (greater than 160 beats/minute)
- Uterine tenderness
- Foul odor of the amniotic fluid

C.) Other conditions threatening the life of the mother, e. g., DIC, Amniotic Embolism, Severe Pre-eclampsia, HELLP, hemorrhage, etc....

1.) Consultation with an obstetrician, plus a pediatrician

2.) Obstetric management to include cervical ripening, augmentation of labor, and antibiotics as appropriate

See appropriate ANMC Clinical Guideline

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Reviewed 12/1/14njm
Approved 9/17/14njm

References

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NICHD Survival and Neurodevelopmental Impairment Data Calculator

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ELBW morbidity & mortality data

Fig.1. Percentage of survival by gestational age

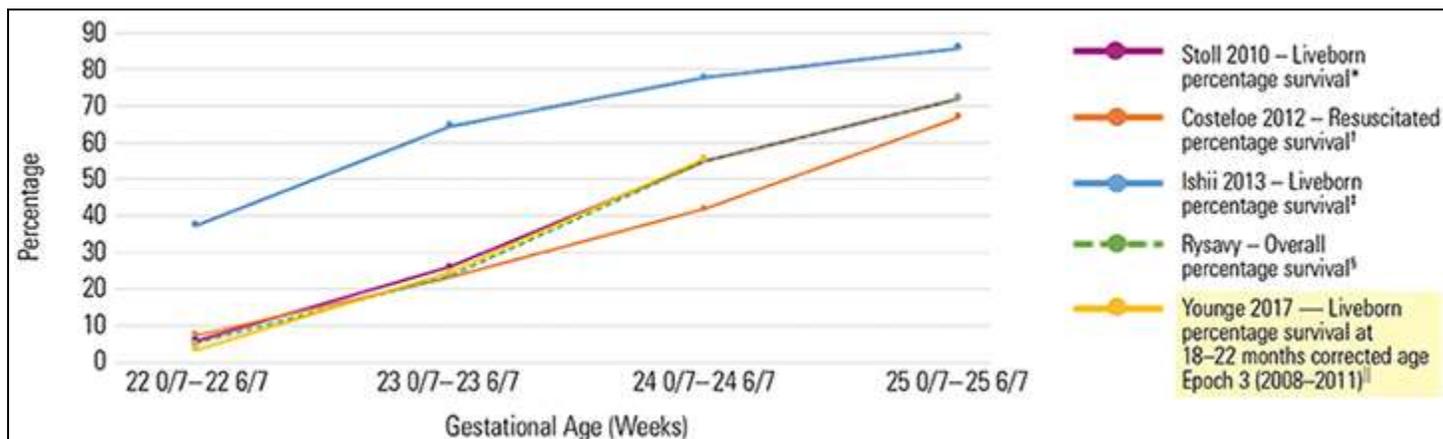


Fig.1. Percentage of survival by gestational age. [↔](#)

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From: Periviable birth. Obstetric Care Consensus No. 6. American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. [Obstet Gynecol 2017;130:e187-9](#)

Fig. 2. Percentage of surviving neonates with severe or moderate disability by gestational age.

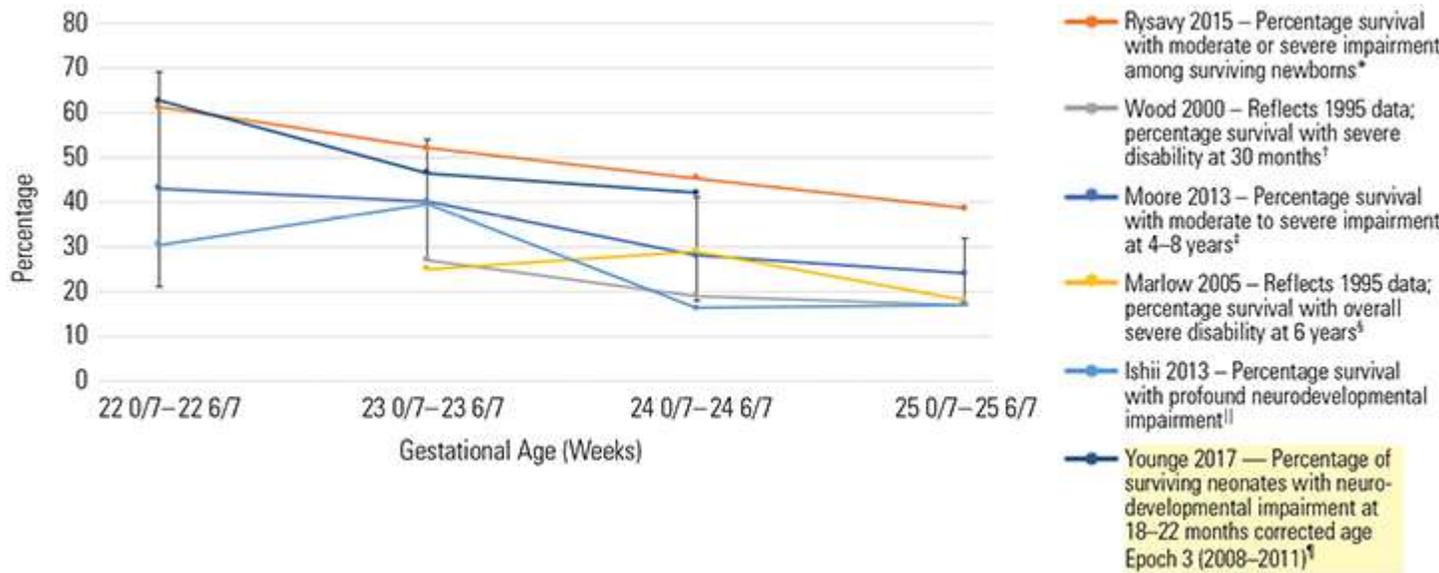


Fig. 2. Percentage of surviving neonates with severe or moderate disability by gestational age. [↔](#)

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