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Innovative Approaches to Treating Apnea of Prematurity: From Sensory Stimulation to Aromatherapy

Aleksandra Kocjan
Ludwik Rydygier Specialist Hospital, Osiedle Złotej Jesieni 1 street, 31-820 Kraków
aleksandra.kocjan@poczta.fm
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5740-6867

Natalie Papachristoforou
SP ZOZ MSWiA Hospital in Kraków, Kronikarza Galla 25 street, 30-053 Kraków
natalienicole120@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8417-3794

Daria Michałka
NZOZ „Centrum Zdrowia i Profilaktyki Dąbie" sp. z o. o., Widok 31 street, 31-567 Kraków
daria.michalka10@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6812-6543

Zuzanna Gałuszka
SPZOZ Hospital in Myślenice, Szpitalna 2 street, 32-400 Myślenice
zuzanna96.galuszka@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-1729-2146

Monika Makar
Niepołomickie Centrum Profilaktyczno - Lecznicze, Stefana Batorego 41C street, 32-005 Niepołomice
monika.makar@onet.pl
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8023-6964

Tomasz Bartuś
Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski University in Kraków, Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego 1 street, 30-705 Kraków
tomaszbartus@yahoo.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3980-3191

Natalia Tekiela
SP ZOZ MSWiA Hospital in Kraków, Kronikarza Galla 25 street, 30-053 Kraków
natatekiela@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5208-251X

Emilia Bąk
SP ZOZ MSWiA Hospital in Kraków, Kronikarza Galla 25 street, 30-053 Kraków
bakemilia320@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6407-4063

Justyna Głowacka
Gabriel Narutowicz Municipal Hospital in Kraków, Prądnicka 35 street, 31-202 Kraków
justyna.glowacka05@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8289-8822

Radosław Chmiel
SP ZOZ MSWiA Hospital in Kraków, Kronikarza Galla 25 street, 30-053 Kraków
radziu98@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-2726-6207

Abstract
Apnea of prematurity (AOP) is a significant health issue affecting neonates born before the 37th week of gestation. It results from the immaturity of respiratory control mechanisms and is often exacerbated by various coexisting factors, which can intensify symptoms and lead to severe health consequences. Despite extensive research on the underlying mechanisms of AOP, a single effective treatment has yet to be identified. Current therapies, such as caffeine administration, are associated with potential adverse effects. Emerging interventions, including sensory stimulation, carbon dioxide inhalation, positional changes, and aromatherapy, offer promising alternatives. These approaches have the potential to complement standard treatments while being less invasive.
Review Methods: Data for the paper was gathered with the usage of Google Scholar. Moreover, articles from sources like PubMed or National Institutes of Health were used. Materials were published between 2015 and 2024.
Results: The review highlights the diverse range of interventions for managing apnea of prematurity (AOP), from traditional therapies like caffeine administration to emerging alternatives such as sensory stimulation, carbon dioxide inhalation, aromatherapy, and kangaroo care. Caffeine remains the cornerstone treatment, although it has limitations and side effects. Promising results were observed with sensory stimulation, such as proprioceptive and tactile techniques, which reduced apnea episodes. Carbon dioxide inhalation and body positioning also showed potential in specific contexts. Aromatherapy, particularly with scents like vanilla and grapefruit, demonstrated a capacity to reduce apnea episodes and improve associated clinical outcomes. However, interventions like blood transfusions and gastroesophageal reflux management yielded inconsistent results, underscoring the need for individualized approaches.
Conclusion: Effective management of AOP requires a multifaceted approach that combines established therapies with innovative interventions tailored to the unique needs of preterm infants. Emerging therapies, including sensory stimulation and aromatherapy, show promise as adjuncts to standard treatments. However, further research is essential to validate these methods, determine their long-term efficacy, and optimize their application in clinical settings. A personalized, patient-centered approach holds the potential to improve outcomes, reduce complications, and enhance the quality of life for neonates affected by AOP.

Keywords: Apnea of prematurity (AOP), Preterm infants, Neonatal care, Caffeine therapy, Kangaroo mother care, Sensory stimulation, AOP treatment

Introduction

The immaturity of respiratory control mechanisms is the primary cause of apnea of prematurity (AOP) in preterm neonates. This condition is often exacerbated by various coexisting factors. Apnea frequently manifests as a symptom of infections, both localized and systemic, and can also occur in the context of central nervous system disorders such as intraventricular hemorrhage, hypoxic-ischemic encephalopathy, or seizures (1).
The frequency and duration of AOP episodes are influenced by thermoregulatory factors: exposure to lower temperatures may reduce the severity of apnea, whereas elevated body temperature increases the risk.

Additionally, metabolic imbalances, such as dysregulated glucose or electrolyte levels, and the presence of a large-patent ductus arteriosus can exacerbate respiratory dysfunction. Other potential contributors to AOP include anemia, which leads to reduced oxygen transport capacity and secondary respiratory depression, and the use of certain medications. AOP is defined as a sudden cessation of breathing lasting at least 20 seconds, accompanied by bradycardia and oxygen desaturation in infants born before 37 weeks of gestation. The risk of AOP increases with lower birth weight can lead to serious complications, including developmental delays, neurological impairments, respiratory failure, cardiovascular issues, intraventricular hemorrhage, and in extreme cases, sudden neonatal death (2).

The use of caffeine as a respiratory stimulant is one of the most common therapeutic approaches for AOP. Caffeine remains a cornerstone of AOP management, with its effects attributed to the inhibition of A1 and A2 adenosine receptor activity (3). Caffeine enhances hypercapnia, improves respiratory rate, tidal volume, central chemosensitivity to carbon dioxide, diaphragm function, and breathing patterns. However, this therapy can have initial side effects, such as hyperactivity, irritability, sleep disturbances, and tachycardia. Moreover, apnea persists in some preterm infants despite caffeine treatment, underscoring the need for further research into alternative and adjunctive therapies (4,5). Available data suggest that the maturation of the respiratory system in preterm infants may progress more rapidly in females than in males. Despite repeated identification of male sex as a significant risk factor for poorer outcomes in preterm neonates, current clinical evidence is insufficient to fully elucidate the mechanisms underlying this risk.

Genetic Factors in Apnea of Prematurity

Recent findings suggest a strong genetic basis for AOP, with heritability estimated at 87% in monozygotic twins. Higher rates of AOP among first-degree relatives of affected infants also support a genetic predisposition. Ongoing genomic research aims to uncover the pathogenic mechanisms underlying AOP, offering hope for targeted interventions (5,12,37).

Therefore, it is crucial to consider sex as a significant factor in future research on apnea of prematurity (AOP) (5,6). Such an approach could pave the way for more personalized therapeutic strategies and improve the quality of care for preterm neonates.

Carbon Dioxide (CO_2)

Inhalation of carbon dioxide (CO_2) is sometimes utilized as a method to stimulate physiological respiratory responses, particularly when CO_2 levels in the body fall below a set threshold, thereby activating respiratory mechanisms.

A study conducted on a group of 42 preterm infants demonstrated that administering CO_2 at a concentration of 0.8% was as effective as theophylline in reducing apnea episodes, without affecting cerebral blood flow (7). The authors suggested that CO_2 therapy might serve as a better alternative to methylxanthines in the treatment of apnea of prematurity (AOP). However, due to the potential for rapid adaptation of neonates to elevated inhaled CO_2 levels, the long-term efficacy of this therapy remains uncertain (8).

Another study hypothesized that, compared to adults, the apnea threshold for PCO_2 in neonates lies very close to their eupneic PCO_2 values. This proximity may contribute to episodes of periodic breathing and apnea. It was proposed that interventions, such as increasing the baseline eupneic PCO_2 level through inhalation of low CO_2 concentrations, might effectively reduce apneas by increasing the gap between the eupneic and apnea thresholds for CO_2 (9).

Proprioceptive Stimulation

A study involving 19 preterm infants examined proprioceptive stimulation of the limbs. Vibrations were used to activate proprioceptive fiber discharge, mimicking natural limb movement and engaging the reflexive coupling of breathing and motion. This process leverages innate reflex neural pathways to enhance ventilation through limb movement, with mechanical activation replacing actual motion stimuli.

The study demonstrated the ability of this method to reduce breathing interruptions, episodes of intermittent hypoxia (IH), and the frequency of bradycardia associated with respiratory disturbances. This low-cost neuromodulatory technique shows promise as a non-invasive intervention for managing apnea of prematurity (10).

Body Positioning

A 2009 study involving 12 preterm infants demonstrated that the prone position significantly reduced thoracoabdominal asynchrony, potentially lowering the frequency of apnea of prematurity (AOP) episodes and improving sleep quality in extremely preterm neonates (11). However, due to the increased risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) associated with this position, it is recommended only under strict medical supervision in hospital settings. After discharge, preterm infants should be placed in the supine position for sleep. Supported or prone positioning also showed significant reductions in the number of respiratory episodes (12).

A 2016 systematic review analyzed five studies, including 114 preterm infants, which investigated body position changes as an intervention for AOP. The review did not provide conclusive evidence that positional changes reduce apnea episodes or improve oxygen saturation. Overall, robust data supporting the cardiovascular and respiratory benefits of body positioning in preterm infants remain lacking (13).

Sensory Stimulation

Sensory stimulation, one of the oldest and most commonly employed methods to manage AOP, involves tactile, auditory, and olfactory stimuli to prevent or reduce apnea episodes. This therapy activates neuronal centers in the brainstem, thereby stimulating the respiratory reflex.

A 2021 prospective study involving 30 preterm infants (born at 32 - 34 weeks of gestation) diagnosed with AOP employed various sensory stimulation methods. These included tactile and proprioceptive stimuli such as hand and foot sole vibrations and passive limb movements. The results showed a statistically significant reduction in daily apnea episodes (14). Additionally, resonance mattresses generating stochastic vibration patterns effectively decreased apnea episodes. However, other methods, such as kinesthetic stimulation, did not yield positive outcomes in treating apnea in neonatal intensive care units (15,16).

Tactile stimulation can also modify arousal levels in neonates, supporting respiratory effort. The effectiveness of sensory stimuli depends on the application site and activation of specific sensory nerves. For instance, vibrations applied to the chest can stimulate intrapulmonary receptors, inducing oscillations in the lungs that influence airway smooth muscle tone, vascular resistance, and heart rate.

Effective cessation of apnea episodes often requires combining tactile stimulation with oxygen therapy or mask ventilation when necessary. The duration of apnea and associated hypoxia or bradycardia depends on the responder's reaction time. Delayed intervention can prolong the episode and exacerbate oxygen desaturation (SpO_2) (15). However, tactile stimulation carries risks such as cross-infections and sleep disturbances, which may negatively affect neonatal growth and development.

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy, using natural or synthetic substances, shows potential as a supportive method to enhance respiratory function in preterm infants experiencing apnea (17). Depending on the specific scent applied, the autonomic nervous system may be stimulated or relaxed. For instance, grapefruit scent has a stimulating effect, increasing heart and respiratory rates, while lavender promotes relaxation. Grapefruit aroma enhances sympathetic activity, raises blood pressure, and reduces vagal nerve activity, an effect with potential implications for conditions like sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) (18). In a study involving 14 preterm infants born between 24 - 28 weeks of gestation with recurrent apnea episodes, exposure to a pleasant scent in their incubators for 24 hours resulted in a 36% reduction in apnea episodes for 12 out of 14 infants. These results highlight the therapeutic potential of olfactory stimulation in managing apnea resistant to conventional treatments (18,21).

Vanilla scent, specifically, has been shown to reduce the frequency and severity of prolonged apnea episodes accompanied by bradycardia in preterm infants. It has demonstrated benefits in infants receiving caffeine therapy or high-flow nasal cannula respiratory support (18,19). Moreover, vanilla aroma encourages oral feeding in preterm infants, which could indirectly reduce the incidence of AOP. It also helps alleviate stress in neonates and positively impacts respiratory centers, promoting balance in physiological and psychological states (20,21).

Due to its noninvasiveness and ability to modulate physiological cycles and sleep quality, olfactory stimulation is useful not only for AOP but also in sleep physiology research and as a potential treatment for sleep apnea and other conditions requiring sensory brain stimulation (22).

Kangaroo Care

Skin-to-skin care, known as the "kangaroo" position, has calming effects and improves clinical and vital parameters in preterm infants. It combines optimal body positioning with tactile and kinesthetic stimuli. A review of four clinical trials conducted in India and Nepal between 2005 - 2016, involving 416 preterm infants, evaluated the impact of kangaroo care on reducing apnea frequency compared to conventional incubator care (23,24).

Kangaroo care offers a protective role by lowering the risk of apnea in preterm infants, potentially decreasing the likelihood of mortality or long-term disabilities in this population (24,25,26). A meta-analysis of these studies found a significant reduction in apnea episodes with kangaroo care compared to conventional methods, though the specifics of concurrent AOP therapy were not clearly defined (24).
However, kangaroo care may complicate the accurate monitoring of apnea in preterm infants unless specific measures are taken to ensure proper respiratory observation during this intervention (25,26).

Feeding Position and Apnea in Preterm Infants
Studies have evaluated how breastfeeding positions influence the frequency, type, and duration of apnea episodes in preterm infants. A study of 35 preterm infants assessed using polygraphic monitoring compared prone (on the stomach) and supine (on the back) positions, with the initial position assigned randomly. The results revealed that infants in the supine position experienced significantly more episodes of central and mixed apnea. Additionally, the duration of mixed apnea episodes, particularly those associated with bradycardia and oxygen desaturation, was longer in the supine position (27).
Comparisons also analyzed feeding posture and intervention related to feeding speed in spontaneously breathing preterm infants born before 32 weeks of gestation. The prone feeding position significantly reduced the frequency and severity of apnea episodes and improved lung function, suggesting its potential to alleviate respiratory challenges in preterm infants (12).

Blood Transfusion
Blood transfusion may reduce apnea in preterm infants by enhancing respiratory drive, improving oxygen transport capacity, and increasing tissue oxygenation. These mechanisms align with observations that anemia heightens the risk of apnea in preterm infants, and transfusion can provide short-term relief from recurrent apnea episodes(28).
However, evidence from retrospective and prospective studies is inconsistent. Transfusions have been associated with reduced heart rate and respiratory rate in anemic infants, but the impact on apnea frequency remains limited. Concerns about adverse outcomes, such as bronchopulmonary dysplasia (BPD) and necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC), are linked to transfusion in low-birth-weight infants. Furthermore, restrictive transfusion practices may lead to short-term neurological events and potentially long-term brain dysfunction, requiring further research to balance risks and benefits (29,30).

Gastroesophageal Reflux (GER)
GER and apnea of prematurity (AOP) often coexist, with some studies hypothesizing that GER triggers apnea via laryngeal chemoreflexes. However, temporal association studies rarely find a significant correlation between GER and apnea episodes. Furthermore, GER does not appear to prolong or intensify apnea events, and pharmacotherapy for GER, such as acid-reducing drugs or prokinetics, has not consistently demonstrated efficacy in reducing recurrent apnea (31,32).

Some pharmacologic treatments have even been associated with increased apnea episodes and adverse effects, such as a higher risk of NEC, late-onset sepsis, and mortality. Advanced diagnostic tools, like multichannel intraluminal impedance (pH-MII), offer better insights into GER, distinguishing between acid and non-acid reflux. A study of 26 preterm infants using simultaneous polysomnography and pH-MII revealed higher apnea frequency in the minute following GER episodes, although individual variability was significant (33,36).
Alternative approaches, such as transpyloric feeding in selected infants with GER-related apnea, have shown promise. However, current data indicate no strong overall correlation between GER and apnea, necessitating further investigation (33,34,35).

Summary
Although various treatment methods for apnea of prematurity (AOP) show promising results, further research is essential to fully understand their long-term efficacy and associated risks. Factors such as sex, birth weight, and the presence of comorbid conditions can significantly influence the choice of optimal therapeutic strategies. Future approaches to AOP management should prioritize more personalized methods tailored to the individual needs of patients. Such strategies could enhance treatment outcomes, reduce the risk of complications, and improve the quality of life for preterm infants.

Author's Contribution
Conceptualization, supervision and project administration: Aleksandra Kocjan, Natalie Papachristoforou, Justyna Głowacka, Daria Michałka.
Methodology: Zuzanna Gałuszka, Monika Makar, Tomasz Bartuś, Natalia Tekiela, Aleksandra Kocjan, Emilia Bąk.
Software and check, validation, formal analysis, investigation, resources and data curation, writing original draft preparation: Tomasz Bartuś, Natalia Tekiela, Radosław Chmiel, Monika Makar, Justyna Głowacka.
Writing review editing and visualization: Emilia Bąk, Natalie Papachristoforou, Daria Michałka, Zuzanna Gałuszka, Radosław Chmiel.

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