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Chapter 1

**General introduction and
outline of the thesis**

Introduction

In The Netherlands approximately 4000 infants are admitted to a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) each year. The majority of these infants are very preterm, born at a gestational age less than 32 weeks. This group of approximately 2500 infants represents 1.4% of all live births and has increased gradually over the past decade (1). The remainder are late preterm and full-term infants with perinatal complications such as asphyxia, respiratory disorders, congenital malformation and perinatal infection.

Brain injury is an important complication in newborn infants requiring intensive care treatment. In preterm infants it may lead to significant cognitive, behavioral, attentional and socialization deficits, and neuromotor disorders (2). Until recently, supratentorial brain injury and especially supratentorial white matter injury, was considered the main cause of impaired neurologic outcome in these infants. However, as a result of improvements in cranial ultrasound (CUS) techniques and the more widespread use of magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) in the last decade, cerebellar injury is now considered an additional important complication of preterm birth and is also increasingly recognized in the full-term infant (3-10). Neonatal cerebellar injury is associated with a broad spectrum of neurodevelopmental disabilities including motor, cognitive, behavioral, language and social deficits (9,11-13).

In this chapter, we will provide background information on the development of the cerebellum, which is extremely rapid in the 3rd trimester of pregnancy, and the pathogenesis of impaired cerebellar development in preterm infants. Cerebellar hemorrhage, being the most frequently occurring form of cerebellar injury in preterm infants, and cerebellar injury in full-term infants will be discussed in more detail. We will describe the advantages and limitations of neuroimaging techniques that can be used for the detection of cerebellar injury in the newborn. Finally, we will discuss the consequences of cerebellar injury for long-term neurodevelopmental outcome.

Cerebellar development

Cerebellar development starts early in fetal life, at 4 weeks of gestation, and continues until about 20 months of age. Growth is extremely rapid in the fetal period between 24-40 weeks of gestation, and by far exceeds supratentorial hemispheric growth. During this period there is a 3-5-fold increase in cerebellar volume and an exponential growth in foliation. As a consequence the cerebellar surface area increases more than 30-fold between 24 and 40 weeks of gestation (2, 5,14-19) (Figure 1).

There are two main proliferative zones in the developing cerebellum (2,5,17,20). The first is the dorsally placed ventricular zone, which is the origin of the Purkinje cells and interneurons of the dentate nuclei. The second proliferative zone is the dorsolateral placed rhombic lip that is the origin of the granular precursor cells that migrate over the subpial cerebellar surface to form the external granular layer. Between 20 and 40 weeks of gestation, the external granular layer is site of vigorous proliferation (5, 19). It expands over the cerebellar surface and is very important for the acceleration in cerebellar growth and foliation. Proliferation occurs in the outer zone, which is in contact with the cerebrospinal fluid and subarachnoid space. The inner zone contains cells that migrate inwards to form the internal granular layer. After 40 weeks of gestation cerebellar growth decelerates and the external granular layer gradually disappears over the first year of life.

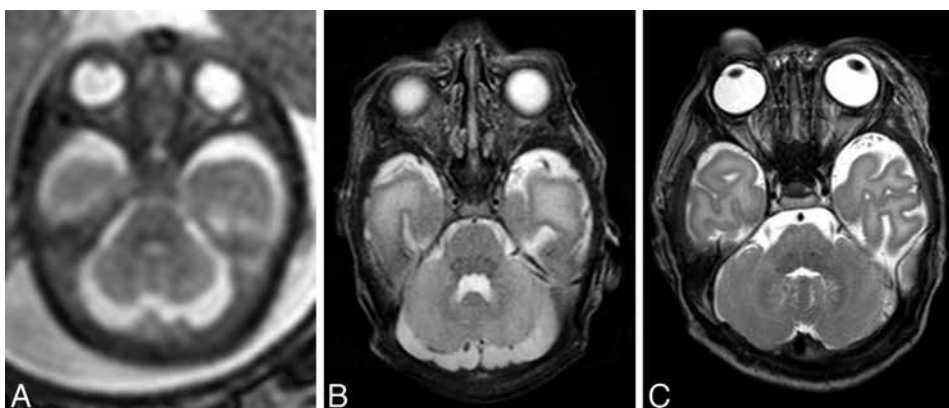


Figure 1. T2-weighted transverse MR images showing fetal cerebellar development at (A) 24 weeks gestation and postnatal cerebellar development at (B) 31 weeks gestation in a preterm infant and at (C) 40 weeks gestation in a full-term baby.

Impaired cerebellar development in preterm infants

Because of its rapid growth and development during late gestation, the cerebellum is very vulnerable in the preterm infant (5). Both the germinal matrix of the external granular layer and the subependymal germinal matrix of the fourth ventricle are fragile structures and susceptible to injury. This may subsequently impair further cerebellar development.

Two forms of impaired cerebellar development can be distinguished in preterm infants (5,19). First, impaired development due to direct, destructive cerebellar injury in the neonatal period. This can be diagnosed before or around term equivalent age (TEA) by CUS and MRI. Second, impaired cerebellar growth and development in the absence of direct cerebellar injury, usually diagnosed after the neonatal period on volumetric MRI studies.

Impaired cerebellar development with direct cerebellar injury

Destructive cerebellar injury diagnosed in the neonatal period is usually hemorrhagic or ischemic in nature. Cerebellar hemorrhage (CBH), one of the topics of this thesis, is the best-studied form of direct cerebellar injury. It may cause destruction and atrophy, usually within 2 months after the insult (Figure 2A). Cerebellar infarction can also occur and may result in the development of cerebellar atrophy (21,22). Profound cerebellar parenchymal loss has been reported in surviving preterm infants with cerebral palsy. This may be due to focal infarction (23,24). However, since these cerebellar lesions are often bilateral and symmetrical, and occur in combination with supratentorial white matter injury, they may also be the result of a more generalized hypoxic-ischemic insult (5).

Impaired cerebellar development in the absence of direct cerebellar injury

Quantitative MRI studies have shown that infants born prematurely have smaller cerebellar volumes at TEA, even in the absence of direct MRI demonstrable cerebellar injury (19,25-28). This may be explained by several factors that complicate the preterm period and can affect brain growth, such as glucocorticoid exposure, hypoxia-ischemia, inflammation and undernutrition (5,15,29-31). Impaired cerebellar development has also been described as a consequence of smaller hemosiderin deposits on the cerebellar surface in the absence of a large CBH. These blood products in the cerebrospinal fluid are toxic to the granular precursor cells of the external granular layer and may disrupt further development (7,32) (Figure 2B).

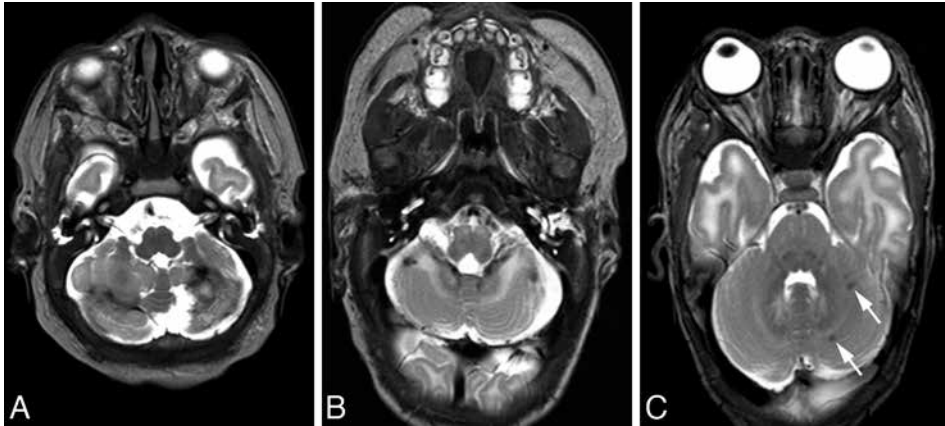


Figure 2. T2-weighted MR images obtained at term equivalent age. (A) in a preterm infant born at 26 weeks gestational age with ultrasound detected bilateral cerebellar hemorrhage, showing destructive lesions in both cerebellar hemispheres and vermis. (B) in a preterm infant born at 27 weeks gestational age, showing small hemosiderin deposits around the fourth ventricle and at the surface of the cerebellar hemispheres, which have become slightly atrophic and asymmetric. (C) in a preterm infant born at 27 weeks gestation, showing punctate hemorrhages in the left cerebellar hemisphere (arrows).

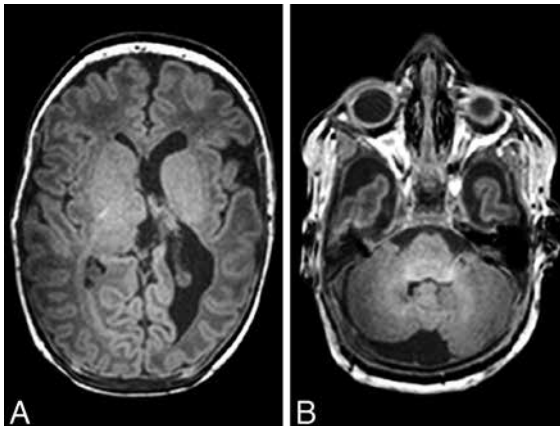


Figure 3. Female infant who was diagnosed with a left-sided fetal intraventricular hemorrhage and ventriculomegaly at 24 weeks gestational age. T1-weighted MR images obtained postnatally at term equivalent age, showing (A) dilatation of left ventricle with periventricular white matter loss and underdevelopment of left thalamus and posterior limb of internal capsule, and (B) a decreased volume of the contralateral cerebellar hemisphere.

Impaired cerebellar development without direct cerebellar injury can occur as a consequence of remote trans-synaptic effects. Primary supratentorial brain injury, in an area that is functionally connected to the cerebellum can influence the development of the contralateral cerebellar hemisphere. Volumetric MRI studies performed in preterm infants demonstrated a relation between supratentorial white matter injury and supratentorial hemorrhage, and cerebellar underdevelopment (25-27,33). Unilateral cerebral brain injury was associated with a decreased volume of the contralateral cerebellar hemisphere and bilateral parenchymal injury resulted in a reduction of total cerebellar volume. This phenomenon is called crossed cerebrotentorial diaschisis (33) (Figure 3). Vice-versa, cerebellocerebral diaschisis may also occur as a consequence of a loss of feedback from a primary affected cerebellar hemisphere to the contralateral cerebral cortex and by this route affect subsequent supratentorial cortical brain development (33,34).

Cerebellar hemorrhage

CBH in the preterm infant originates in the vulnerable germinal matrix of the external granular layer and/or the subependymal germinal matrix of the fourth ventricle. In these structures, fragile capillary networks are present that can easily rupture. This risk is enhanced by the pressure passive circulation in sick and prematurely born infants (6,35). Two main patterns of CBH are described in the literature. The first includes large focal CBH, which is mostly unilateral and hemispheric, but can also occur bilaterally or affect the vermis (Figure 2A). These larger hemorrhages can be diagnosed with CUS, especially with the use of additional acoustic windows (4,8,36). Large and destructive CBH especially occurs in extremely preterm or low birth weight infants (gestational age <28 weeks and/or birth weight <750 grams) in whom the incidence may be as high as 19% (4). Presenting signs can be motor agitation and unexplained ventriculomegaly on CUS, but clear clinical symptoms are often lacking (37). CBH often occurs in combination with supratentorial germinal matrix/intraventricular hemorrhage (GM/IVH). This is related to the fact that the mechanisms causing CBH resemble those of GM/IVH and both can occur simultaneously. The pathogenesis of large CBH is multifactorial, as in GM/IVH, and includes perinatal circulatory events compromising cerebral circulation such as fetal distress, patent ductus arteriosus, and hypotension, and factors that affect cerebro-

vascular autoregulation, such as low pH and hypercarbia (4,5,38). Large destructive CBH is associated with high neonatal mortality and significant risk for impaired neurodevelopmental outcome (11,39,40).

The second pattern of CBH includes smaller or punctate hemorrhagic lesions that are difficult to detect on CUS but are frequently seen on MRI and can occur as a single focal hemorrhage or as multiple bilateral hemorrhages (Figure 2C). The etiology and outcome of these smaller hemorrhagic lesions may be different from large CBH. Up to now, little is known about perinatal and postnatal factors that may be associated with small CBH, and information on neurodevelopmental outcome is limited (41).

Cerebellar injury in term infants

The more widespread use of advanced neuroimaging techniques has led to an increased detection of cerebellar injury in high-risk full-term infants. In these infants CBH can occur as a consequence of traumatic delivery and has been associated with asphyxia, perinatal infection, supratentorial hemorrhage and extra-corporeal membrane oxygenation (3,9,42) (Figure 4). Cerebellar involvement can occur in infants with hypoxic-ischemic encephalopathy (HIE). The Purkinje cells and the granule cells of the internal and external granular layers are vulnerable to hypoxic-ischemic injury (35). Especially the cerebellar vermis can be involved in term HIE and a disturbance of growth has been described (43-45). It is not clear whether this is the result of direct cerebellar injury or the consequence of remote trans-synaptic effects related to supratentorial brain damage. However, cerebellar abnormalities have also been reported on early neonatal MR scans and in combined MRI/autopsy studies in infants with severe HIE (46-48).

Central nervous system infections can affect the cerebellum. In both term and preterm infants cerebellar abscesses have been described. The cerebellum can also be affected by viral infections, such as herpes and enterovirus meningoencephalitis (49,50) and by congenital cytomegalovirus infection, which can induce cerebellar hypoplasia (51,52). Disrupted cerebellar development can also be detected at birth as a consequence of an intra-uterine hypoxic or hemorrhagic event. Several inborn errors of metabolism can affect the development of the cerebellum during early and late pregnancy and lead to structural abnormalities and hypoplasia or

induce progressive cerebellar atrophy (53) (Figure 5). Finally, congenital cerebellar malformations can be a component of several syndromic and chromosomal disorders (54).

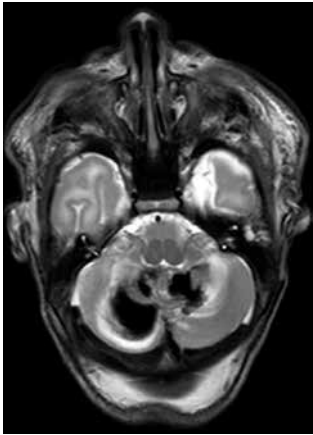


Figure 4. Female infant born asphyxiated at 40 weeks gestational age after vaginal breech delivery. T2-weighted MRI shows bilateral extensive cerebellar hemorrhages and extra-axial posterior fossa hemorrhage.

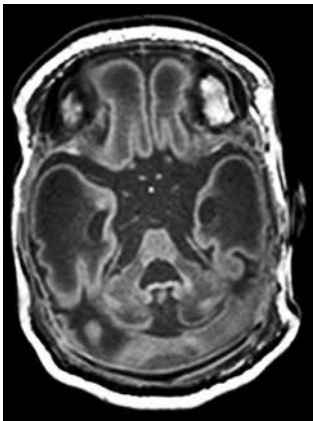


Figure 5. Male infant from consanguineous parents born at 38 weeks gestational age with refractory neonatal seizures, persistent lactate acidosis and a suspected metabolic disorder. T1-weighted MRI shows severely hypoplastic cerebellum (vermis and hemispheres) and abnormal gyration and signal intensity of the temporal lobes.

Imaging the cerebellum

Cranial ultrasound

CUS is the preferred technique for brain imaging in high-risk neonates. Its major advantages are that it is safe, inexpensive, and can be performed early and repeatedly at the bedside, with little disturbance to the infant. Although the advantages of CUS are numerous, there are also limitations. Quality of CUS imaging depends on the skills and experience of the operator. It is routinely performed through the anterior fontanel (AF). With optimal settings, this provides an excellent view of most supratentorial structures, but evaluation of the peripheral and superficial structures located at the convexity of the cerebral hemispheres may remain difficult. Furthermore, visualization of infratentorial structures is suboptimal because of the distance from the transducer to the posterior fossa. In addition, the echogenic tentorium and vermis may impede the detection of lesions (55). The use of the mastoid fontanelle (MF), located at the junction of the parietal, temporal and occipital bones improves visualization of the posterior fossa. The transducer is positioned closer to its structures and they are approached at a different angle, avoiding the echogenic tentorium. Previous studies have stressed the advantages of CUS using the MF approach for the detection of posterior fossa lesions in neonates (4,56-59). Despite the clinical relevance of cerebellar injury, MF views are in most centers not part of routine CUS examination in high-risk neonates.

Magnetic resonance imaging

MRI has several advantages over CUS imaging. It provides detailed images of the whole brain and detects abnormalities in areas that are difficult to visualize with CUS, such as the posterior fossa. MRI demonstrates maturational processes in the brain in more detail and allows more precise depiction of the site, extent and origin of lesions. Modern MRI techniques, including diffusion-weighted and susceptibility-weighted imaging are of additional value in the detection of acute hypoxic-ischemic lesions and sensitive for small hemosiderin deposits. However, compared with CUS, MRI is more expensive and burdensome in critically ill neonates. It requires sedation and transportation to the MR unit and is therefore less suitable for early and serial imaging (60).

Outcome of cerebellar injury

The cerebellum does not only play an important role in motor function, but also in several non-motor functions. Clinical correlates of cerebellar disorders in children and adults involve cognitive deficits concerning visual-spatial abilities, language, learning and memory, attentional deficits, and disorders in mood, affect and behavior (5,61-65). These deficits may be caused by an interruption in the functional interactions between the cerebellum and the cerebral cortex. Follow-up studies in very preterm infants show a relation between cerebellar volumes and cognitive function (66,67). Extensive cerebellar lesions are associated with a significant risk for impaired neurodevelopmental outcome (11,13,24). A detailed study by Limperopoulos et al. describes neurological abnormalities in 66% of a group of 35 preterm infants with isolated CBH as compared to 5% in a control group (11). Infants with isolated cerebellar injury had a high incidence of neuromotor disabilities (48%), cognitive disabilities (40%), expressive (42%) and receptive (37%) language disorders, internalizing behavioral problems (34%) and abnormal autism screening (37%). These deficits could not be explained by associated cerebral injury and were worse in infants with bilateral involvement of the cerebellum. Involvement of the vermis was associated with a higher risk of social behavioral deficits and abnormal autism screening.

The outcome of smaller CBH that causes less or no destruction of the cerebellar parenchyma may be more optimistic. However, up to now information on neurodevelopmental outcome is limited. One study assessed the outcome of preterm infants with small MRI-diagnosed CBH. Although outcome was more favorable than in infants with large CBH, infants with small CBH were still at increased risk of neurological abnormalities. The number of cases with follow-up in this study was small (41).

Aims and outline of this thesis

The general aim of this thesis was to study and describe the incidence and characteristics of cerebellar injury and to investigate the role of different neuroimaging techniques (CUS and MRI) for the detection of posterior fossa abnormalities in both preterm and high-risk full-term infants.

The work described in this thesis is divided in three parts:

Part I Neonatal neuroimaging

In experienced hands, CUS is an excellent tool to detect the most frequently occurring brain abnormalities in preterm and full-term infants. However, there are also limitations and MRI is additionally needed in most infants with suspected parenchymal brain injury and/or neurologic symptoms.

Chapters 2 and 3 describe the standard CUS procedure and supplementary imaging techniques, including the use of different transducer types and scan frequencies, and the use of additional acoustic windows to optimize the performance of CUS.

Part II Cerebellar injury in the preterm neonate

Cerebellar injury is a frequent complication of preterm birth with important prognostic consequences. This part focuses on the detection, risk factors and prognostic implications of cerebellar injury in preterm infants.

Chapter 4 describes the characteristics of cerebellar injury in a prospective cohort of very preterm infants and compares the diagnostic performance of serial CUS with AF and additional MF views for the detection of cerebellar injury, with the results of MRI.

Chapter 5 Small CBH are a frequent MR finding in preterm infants. In this chapter we report the association between perinatal risk factors and the occurrence of these small hemorrhages, and examine the association with supratentorial brain injury and neurodevelopmental outcome at 2 years of age.

Chapter 6 Gradient echo T2*-weighted MR sequences are more sensitive for the detection of (small) hemorrhages in the brain than T2-weighted echo sequences. This chapter describes the clinical value of gradient echo MRI for brain imaging in very preterm infants.

Part III Cerebellar injury in the term neonate

Similar to preterm infants, cerebellar injury in full-term infants is associated with a broad spectrum of neurodevelopmental disabilities. Early detection is therefore important.

Chapter 7 describes the technique of MF sonography in full-term infants and the combined ultrasound and MR features of posterior fossa abnormalities that may be encountered in various neonatal disorders and conditions.

Chapter 8 describes the incidence and characteristics of posterior fossa abnormalities in a retrospective cohort of high-risk full-term infants and compares the diagnostic performance of serial CUS with AF and additional MF views for the detection of posterior fossa abnormalities, with the results of MRI.

In **Chapter 9** we discuss the main findings of this thesis and suggest directions for future research. A summary of the work described in this thesis is provided in **Chapter 10**. **Chapter 11** provides a Dutch summary.

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