

Review Article

Insulin Resistance in Gestational Diabetes Mellitus: Pathophysiology, Risk Factors, and Clinical Implications—A Comprehensive Review

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24321/2455.7048.202612>

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How to cite this article:

Bhat R, Rather A. Insulin Resistance in Gestational Diabetes Mellitus: Pathophysiology, Risk Factors, and Clinical Implications—A Comprehensive Review. *Epidem Int.* 2026;11(3):3-8.

Date of Submission: 2026-06-22

Date of Acceptance: 2026-07-31

A B S T R A C T

Several physiologic, hormonal, and molecular processes contribute to the emergence of hyperglycaemia during pregnancy. Increased insulin resistance is seen during the course of a healthy pregnancy. During the early stages of normal pregnancies, the pancreatic β -cells secrete more insulin, which slows the rise in plasma glucose levels. This regulation explains the abnormally modest increases in plasma glucose levels brought on by elevated insulin resistance. The aim of this review was to evaluate the role of insulin resistance in gestational diabetes mellitus (GDM). The authors extensively searched various electronic databases like PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar for the collection of material regarding the role of insulin resistance in GDM. It was seen that hyperglycaemia results from the combination of the pregnancy's increased insulin tolerance and pancreatic beta-cell insufficiency. Scientific studies have revealed that individuals who present with GDM are more likely to acquire chronic insulin resistance because of the superimposition of lower insulin production by the cells in that condition (GDM). Due to their significance in the development of postpartum diabetes mellitus, inflammation markers in GDM have been widely researched. Inflammation during GDM induces adaptive reactions in the placenta, which can have a substantial effect on the programming of foetal development.

Keywords: Pregnancy, Insulin, β -cells, Pathophysiology, Gestational diabetes mellitus

Introduction

Gestational diabetes mellitus (GDM) is one of the most common maternal complications, and its frequency has increased globally alongside the rise of type 2 diabetes. The term gestational diabetes mellitus refers to any dysglycaemia that develops or is identified for the first time during pregnancy. It has become a global public health problem and one of the world's leading public

health concerns for both mothers and children. It causes various pregnancy problems and has been linked to adverse maternal and foetal outcomes, including a higher risk of pre-eclampsia, caesarean sections, increased foetal weight with accompanying issues, and hypoglycaemia.¹ Maintaining glycaemic control during pregnancy greatly reduces the frequency of adverse outcomes, according to studies.² According to the Hyperglycemia and Adverse Pregnancy

Outcome (HAPO) study, obesity and GDM are separate and combined risk factors for adverse pregnancy outcomes.^{3,4} Pregnancy is characterised by elevated insulin resistance.⁵ As pregnancy continues, increased insulin resistance is observed during the second and third trimesters.⁶ This increase in insulin resistance is believed to promote foetal growth by ensuring higher glucose levels in the mother.⁷ It also leads to the increased utilisation of lipolysis pathways as energy sources in the mother, resulting in an increase in free fatty acids (FFA). GDM is characterised by an increased supply of nutrients to the foetus, resulting in excessive growth. Due to the release of adipocytokines and the diabetogenic action of placental hormones, there is an increase in insulin resistance throughout pregnancy.⁸⁻¹⁰ The increased resistance is mostly the result of the diabetogenic effects of pregnancy hormones including cortisol, oestrogen, progesterone, human placental lactogen (hPL), and placental growth hormone (hPGH).^{11,12} Increased adiposity during pregnancy is another factor linked to the development of insulin resistance. This is attributed to the influence of adipocytokines, which are hormones generated from adipocytes. It was hypothesised that insulin resistance is caused by post-receptor alterations that influenced insulin receptor-mediated processes. The steroid hormones cortisol, progesterone, and oestrogen have well-documented hyperglycaemic effects. As pregnancy continues, progesterone output rises, and this hormone is linked to insulin resistance in multiple ways.^{13,14} hPL and hPGH are placental hormones that have extensive metabolic interactions and are principally responsible for ensuring that the foetus receives an adequate amount of carbohydrates. It has been demonstrated that hPL levels increase significantly during pregnancy and that hPL leads to peripheral insulin resistance.^{15,16} A recent study has shown that adipose tissue and its accompanying cytokines, known as adipokines, play a significant role in the development of insulin resistance. Previously, placental hormones were thought to be predominantly responsible for the development of insulin resistance. Adiponectin, tumour necrosis factor- α (TNF- α), leptin, retinol binding protein-4 (RBP-4), interleukin-6 (IL-6), visfatin, and resistin have been evaluated as insulin resistance mediators. Adipocytes secrete adiponectin, and adiponectin levels are seen to decline as pregnancy develops. It has been demonstrated that GDM is associated with lower plasma adiponectin concentrations. In laboratory investigations, the effect of TNF- α on raising insulin resistance has been demonstrated.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ Multiple studies have demonstrated a correlation between TNF levels and insulin resistance. It has also been reported that TNF- α reduces insulin secretion in GDM pregnancies. A study revealed that GDM is associated with elevated levels of TNF- α and decreased levels of adiponectin. According to reports, adipose tissue

is connected with the release of adipokines that mediate insulin resistance. These adipokines influence glucose metabolism and insulin resistance via their effects on skeletal muscle, liver, and pancreatic β -cells, as well as molecular pathways that influence glucose transport.¹⁹⁻²³

Role of Hormones in Gestational Diabetes Mellitus

The placenta influences various hormonal axes throughout pregnancy. Pregnancy hormones are secreted into maternal blood by the placenta. In some cases, the placenta secretes hormones that either bypass or completely replace normal hormonal regulation. Because of structural similarities to hormones present in the non-pregnant state, placental hormones may also regulate hormone release. Human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG), human placental lactogen (hPL), and human placental growth hormone (hPGH) are examples of pregnancy hormones. Hormones such as prolactin, oestrogen, and cortisol are present in increasing levels in maternal circulation throughout pregnancy. The growth hormone axis is an example of maternal metabolism takeover: pituitary growth hormone (GH) is eventually replaced by hPGH during pregnancy. It nearly fully replaces pituitary growth hormone in the maternal blood by around 20 weeks of pregnancy and, unlike GH, is released tonically rather than in a pulsatile manner.^{24,25} Also, the level of hPGH in the blood is similar to that of acromegaly, which is 10 times higher than GH outside of pregnancy. Compared to GH, hPGH has been said to have somatogenic bioactivity instead of a lactogenic one.²⁶ The hPGH may also have the same diabetogenic repercussions as pituitary growth hormone, such as high insulin levels, lowered insulin-stimulated glucose uptake and glycogen synthesis, and a decreased ability of insulin to stop hepatic gluconeogenesis. Some of these effects have been seen in rodents *in vitro*, but the effects on human pregnancy are less clear. It looks like hPGH is what controls the levels of insulin-like growth factors (IGFs) during pregnancy. This shows that GH, hPGH, IGFs, and insulin-like growth factor binding proteins (IGF-BPs) all work together. This could be the pathway that links insulin resistance and the growth hormone axis during pregnancy.²⁷⁻³¹ Intriguingly, the pregnancy-associated plasma protein A (PAPP-A), which is used for first-trimester risk assessment at the time of the nuchal translucency scan due to its abundance during the first trimester, appears to be intricately associated with the IGF-BPs and thus with the growth hormone-IGF axis during pregnancy. Such findings strongly suggest that the growth hormone-IGF axis plays a function during pregnancy. Estradiol, progesterone, prolactin, cortisol, hPL, and hPGH have been characterised as mediators of the shift in insulin sensitivity during pregnancy. In contrast, Kirwan JP et al. performed correlations between the changes in plasma

levels of cortisol, leptin, human chorionic gonadotropin (HCG), oestrogen, progesterone, and hPL throughout pregnancy and the changes in insulin sensitivity. Only a substantial association between insulin sensitivity and cortisol levels was discovered by the scientists.^{19,32,33} Instead, McIntyre HD et al. discovered that IGFBP1, triglycerides, and leptin were substantially linked with maternal insulin sensitivity. Thus, no one hormone has been identified to explain insulin resistance during pregnancy at this time. Many placental hormones have relatively short half-lives in the maternal blood. Within 24 to 48 hours following birth, the impact of such placental hormones is gone and, in many ways, nonpregnant physiology is restored.^{28,34,35} This means that within one or two days after giving birth, mothers with type 1 diabetes have insulin needs that are the same as or even lower than they were before they got pregnant.^{36,37}

Pancreatic β -cell Function

In normal pregnancies, β -cells undergo hyperplasia, hypertrophy, and increased secretory activity to counteract increased insulin resistance. It has been argued that one facet of the continuum of insulin resistance leads to GDM. Insulin sensitivity is known to have been reduced in females with poor glucose tolerance during pregnancy.^{38,39} This compromises pancreatic beta cells and renders them incapable of compensating for increasing insulin resistance during pregnancy. This leads to GDM hyperglycaemia. Pancreatic-cell dysfunction is the inability of cells to recognise and respond effectively to circulating glucose levels.^{38,40} Changes in placental hormones and cytokines have been linked to pancreatic β -cell dysfunction, lipotoxicity, glucotoxicity, and elevated indicators of inflammatory and oxidative stress in GDM.⁴¹

Discussion

There are a variety of potential causes for GDM. Some of them are elevated BMI, obesity, weight gain during pregnancy, dietary habits, family history, and past medical history. These factors work in an additive fashion to exacerbate insulin resistance and β -cell dysfunction. GDM was distinguished from normal pregnancies by abnormal glucose and lipid metabolism.^{41,42} Hyperinsulinemia, hyperglycaemia, and hyperlipidaemia are metabolic abnormalities associated with it. These changed metabolic consequences have been demonstrated to modify gene expression, raise oxidative stress markers, increase lipid peroxidation levels, increase inflammatory markers, and alter the production and secretion of vasoactive molecules. Genes with altered expression have been discovered in GDM mothers. Several genes are expressed differently in the placenta of GDM patients.⁴³⁻⁴⁶ The degree of total antioxidant potential was shown to be lower in the serum of GDM mothers as compared to controls during

pregnancy. In GDM pregnancies, the blood concentrations of oxidative stress markers appeared to be greater than in control pregnancies. Indicators of oxidative stress in placental tissues of GDM-affected babies have improved, according to studies. In the maternal blood and placenta of GDM pregnancies, there was an increase in oxidative damage and a decrease in antioxidant defence systems, according to a prospective study. In women with GDM, an increase in malonyldialdehyde (MDA) levels, which serve as a template for lipid peroxidation, has been found.⁴⁷⁻⁴⁹ It was also claimed that no substantial change in lipid peroxidation was seen in GDM pregnancies. Inflammatory markers in GDM have been extensively researched due to their role in the development of postpartum diabetes mellitus. The involvement of inflammation in the placenta during gestational diabetes may have a significant role in foetal growth.^{50,51} As a result of these biochemical changes in GDM, there was an improvement in the release of vasoactive molecules. In gestational diabetes, alterations in the normal levels of endothelial dysfunction markers such as soluble vascular cell adhesion molecule-1 (sVCAM-1) and endothelial nitric oxide synthase (eNOS) have been identified in both maternal and cord blood. Therefore, it has been established that these metabolic alterations lead to placental endothelial dysfunction. Hypoxia affects the placenta in gestational diabetes. In an experimental study on the placenta of mice, there was an increase in both hypoxia and inflammatory responses. These enhancements have been described as modifications to the microvascular and microscopic structures of the placenta.⁵² As evidenced by placental structural changes, the placenta has the ability to adapt to its hormonal and metabolic environment. According to the Pederson Hypothesis, the increased glucose availability to the foetus also causes excessive foetal growth. The extended theory further adds that high glucose causes the foetal pancreas to release considerable quantities of insulin. It may lead to foetal hyperinsulinemia, which can influence the oxygen demand that causes hypoxia,⁵³ as a result of which, placental alterations like hypercapillarisation and developmental programming were triggered. The reciprocal impacts of the maternal, foetal, and placental metabolic environment depended on the form and function of the placenta.⁴⁶ As a result, these factors influence pregnancy outcomes.

Conclusion

Gestational diabetes mellitus (GDM) is a serious pregnancy complication in which people without previously diagnosed diabetes have chronic hyperglycaemia after delivery. In certain instances, pancreatic-cell dysfunction leads to poor glycaemic regulation on the basis of chronic insulin resistance, resulting in hyperglycaemia. Elevated insulin resistance is a characteristic of pregnancy. Around the second or third trimester, rising insulin resistance is

observed. This increase in insulin resistance is believed to ensure that higher glucose levels in the mother support foetal growth. It also increases the utilisation of the mother's lipolysis pathways as energy sources, leading to an increase in free fatty acids. Inflammatory markers in GDM have been examined primarily due to their significance in the development of postpartum diabetes mellitus. Inflammation triggers adaptive responses in the placenta during gestational diabetes, which may play a significant role in foetal developmental programming. The ability to tailor the best possible treatment for pregnant women with diabetes, beneficial for the mother and the next generation, depends on having a thorough understanding of the mechanisms underlying the development of insulin resistance during pregnancy and its impact on the offspring. This requires knowledge of the causes and effects of insulin resistance in pregnancy.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge all the authors whose work has been reviewed in the preparation of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest: None

Source of Funding: None

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