The association of matrix metalloproteinase-9 and fetal fibronectin in the first trimester threatened miscarriage

Maha Saad Maki1,*, Mohammed Shamal Ali1 M, Zghair Rawi H

1University of Technology-Iraq, Applied Sciences Department, Branch of Chemistry, Baghdad, Iraq
2Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, College of Medicine, Al-Mustansiriyah University Baghdad, Iraq

Abstract

**Introduction:** Vaginal bleeding during the first trimester of pregnancy, accompanied by a positive fetal heart rate and a closed cervix, is medically referred to as a threatened miscarriage. This condition is considered one of the most prevalent complications within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. It is important to note that, this condition is a potential indication of danger to the fetus, and therefore; requires immediate medical attention and monitoring (1,2).

The majority of cases of threatened miscarriage have an idiopathic underlying cause. However, in other cases, genetic factors; causes such as endocrine disorders, hemophilia, lifestyle, environmental conditions (3,4), can be attributed to about 50% of cases. It is imperative to identify the root cause of the condition to determine the most effective course of treatment. Therefore, further research is required to gain a better understanding of the etiology of this condition and to develop effective treatment strategies.

Key point

Matrix metalloproteinase 9 and fetal fibronectin were evaluated in the serum of first-trimester pregnant women; increased levels of matrix metalloproteinase and fetal fibronectin were found in the pregnant women who complained vaginal bleeding, which may be the cause of threatened miscarriage.

**Materials and Methods:** A case-control study on threatened miscarriage was conducted at Alkarama hospital and Ibn al Balady Hospital in Baghdad. Serum levels of fFN and MMP-9 were analyzed in 91 pregnant women with matching gestational ages, divided into two groups of threatened miscarriage (patient: n=30) and healthy pregnant women (control: n=61). The differences in serum concentration of fFN and MMP-9 between the two groups, as well as their correlation with clinical outcomes, were statistically evaluated.

**Results:** There were variations in serum concentrations of matrix metalloproteinase 9 between the threatened miscarriage group (49.34±1.08 pg/mL) and the control group (12.19±4.90 pg/mL). Statistical analysis showed a P-value of 0.009. FFN levels were found to be higher in the threatened miscarriage patient group (467.85±6.22 pg/mL) compared to the control group (230.66±37.44 pg/mL), with a P-value of 0.003. A positive correlation was observed between MMP-9 and fFN (r=0.877, P=0.001). The 95% confidence interval for fFN was (0.9-0.992) and for MMP-9 was (0.78-0.96).

**Conclusion:** Increased levels of MMP-9 and fFN have been associated with a higher risk of fetal demise.
Throughout pregnancy, the human placenta plays a crucial role in ensuring a consistent flow of blood to the developing fetus. This is achieved by the placenta infiltrating the maternal tissues and vasculature. However, complications arising from abnormal placentation development can have profound effects on both the mother and the fetus. Therefore, it is vital to closely monitor placentation development to mitigate any potential risks and promote optimal health for both mother and fetus (8).

The invasion of the placental trophoblast requires the regulation of cellular adhesion as well as the remodeling and degradation of the extracellular matrix (ECM) (9). Matrix metalloproteinase-9 (MMP-9) is a 92 kDa type IV collagenase, 92 kDa gelatinase, or gelatinase B (GELB)-type enzyme. It is an enzyme that breaks down the ECM. The major structure of MMP-9 (gelatinase B) (EC3.4.24.25) includes a signal peptide, propeptide, catalytic domain, three tandem repeats of fibronectin type II inserts within the catalytic domain, a proline-rich and extensively O-glycosylated linker, and a hemopexin-like domain (10). MMP-9 plays a significant role in the penetration of human cytotrophoblast cells into the endometrium, as well as in embryo implantation and development (11). MMP-9 is a key protease in this process, and its activity is tightly regulated for proper implantation and embryonic development (12).

MMP-9 is an enzyme that requires zinc to function (11). It plays a crucial role in breaking down the maternal basement membrane, which is primarily composed of type IV collagen (11). The concentration of MMP-9 in the placental bed is low during the sixth and seventh weeks of pregnancy and gradually increases after the eighth week; by the eleventh week trophoblast cells release MMP-9 continuously (13).

Early miscarriage which occurs before the 12-week gestation mark, is caused by the overexpression of MMP-9. This overexpression is associated with trophoblast invasion and angiogenesis (13).

Throughout pregnancy, the ECM is essential for uterine structural integrity, embryo attachment, and placentation invasion, serving as glue with adhesive glycoproteins and adhesion receptors (14).

Fetal fibronectin (fFN) is a glycoprotein that is an important component of the ECM. It is primarily found at the interfaces between the uterus and placenta, as well as between the chorion and decidua, where it plays a crucial role in facilitating adhesion between the mother and fetus. Fibronectin is essential for various embryonic processes, including embryogenesis, cell spreading, migration, proliferation, and apoptosis. If fibronectin is degraded, it can result in early embryonic lethality (15).

Various retrospective studies using enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay measurements of fFN have shown a closer relationship between the concentration of fFN in cervicovaginal fluid and the risk of spontaneous miscarriage. These studies have found that higher concentrations of fFN are linked to an increased risk of spontaneous miscarriage (16). The current study aims to investigate the effects of these factors, to provide valuable insights into the underlying mechanisms of threatened miscarriage and potentially identify new targets for therapeutic interventions.

**Objectives**

Evaluate MMP-9 and fFN levels in the serum of first-trimester pregnant women to determine if these potential biomarkers have an impact on women at risk of threatened miscarriage.

**Patients and Methods**

**Study design**

The study involved 91 pregnant women aged 20-35 from two hospitals Baghdad al Karama Hospital and Ibn al Balady Hospital. They attended an obstetrics and gynecology unit from November 2022 to February 2023 and were divided into two groups (patient and control). All participants were in the first trimester of pregnancy between 6 to 12 weeks of gestation with body mass index (BMI) between 18 and 25 kg/m².

**Inclusion criteria**

This study specifically includes patients who are pregnant and experiencing vaginal bleeding between 6 and 12 weeks of pregnancy. These patients must have a single-tone fetus with a positive heartbeat.

**Exclusion criteria**

- Patients with uncertain gestational age.
- Obesity.
- Smokers.
- Pregnant women with chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, thyroid dysfunction, and hemophilia.

**Sample collection**

Blood samples (10 mL) were collected via venipuncture into vacuum collection tubes from each participant included in the study. The vacuum tube was then subjected to centrifugation at 4000 rpm for 15 minutes to obtain serum, which was stored at -20 °C after aliquoting into multiple Eppendorf tubes for analysis.

The concentration of fFN and MMP-9 were analyzed using an enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay.

**Methods**

The Sunlong sandwich-ELISA (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) kit from China utilizes a pre-coated micro-ELISA strip plate with an antibody specific to MMP-9. Horseradish peroxidase-conjugated antibody is then added to standards or samples. After incubation, TMB substrate solution is added, and only wells with MMP-9 and HRP-conjugated antibodies turn blue.
Matrix metalloproteinase-9 (MMP-9) concentration is determined by measuring optical density (OD) at 450 nm. Similarly, the IFN kit also utilizes the Sunlong sandwich-ELISA kit from China which includes a pre-coated micro-ELISA strip plate with an antibody specific to IFN. Standards or samples are added, followed by the addition of horseradish peroxidase-conjugated antibody. After incubation, TMB (5,5′-tetramethylbenzidine) substrate solution is added, and the OD is measured at 450 nm. The concentration of IFN in samples is then calculated by comparing the OD to the standard curve.

**Statistical analysis**

The collected data were entered, double-checked, and analyzed using IBM SPSS software version 26. Descriptive statistics were used to qualitatively summarize the characteristics of the collected data in this study. The independent sample t test was utilized to determine the significance among the study's groups. A P value of less than 0.05 was suggested to indicate differences among the study's groups. Pearson’s correlation coefficient was conducted to analyze correlations. The receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve was employed to find cutoff values and evaluate some parameters as diagnostic markers. Data were considered when; not significant \( P > 0.05 \) and significant \( P \leq 0.05 \).

**Results**

A total of 91 samples from both groups were investigated. The age of each study sample was normally distributed and ranged from 18 to 35 years with a mean age of 26.16±4.25 years for the control group and 20 to 35 years, with a mean age of 26.96 ± 4.06 years for the patient group respectively. There were no significant differences between them (\( P=0.176 \); Table 1).

The percentages of previous miscarriages in both groups were 24.59% (15) cases and 83.34% (25) cases in the healthy and unhealthy groups respectively.

The results of MMP-9 in this study revealed a significant association between first-trimester threatened miscarriage and the protein MMP-9. The statistical analysis showed a \( P \) value of 0.009, indicating a strong correlation between the two variables. The patient group, consisting of women who experienced a threatened miscarriage, had a mean level of MMP-9 of 49.34±1.08 pg/mL, which was significantly higher than the control group’s mean level of 12.19±4.90 pg/mL as shown in the Table 1.

The levels of serum IFN were measured in both the control group of the threatened miscarriage patients and in the patient group. The results showed a statistically significant difference between the two groups (\( P=0.003 \)). Specifically, the mean level of serum IFN in the control group was 230.66±37.44 pg/mL, while the patient group had a significantly higher mean level of 467.85±6.22 pg/mL. These findings suggest a potential correlation between serum IFN levels and certain medical conditions during pregnancy.

The findings indicate a significant correlation between IFN and MMP-9 with a \( P \) value of 0.001 (Table 2).

**Specificity and sensitivity test for MMP-9 and IFN**

Fetal fibronectin and MMP-9 were evaluated for their ability to distinguish between cases of threatened miscarriage and healthy control. The area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUC) serves as a measure of a marker's ability to discriminate between cases and controls. For the most severe cases of bleeding during pregnancy, the ROC area is closer to 1, while for those least affected, the ROC area is closer to 0.5 indicating a reliable test.

The analysis of the ROC curve was used to test the ability of IFN levels in serum to diagnose threatened miscarriage. The results indicate that high levels of IFN in serum for threatened miscarriage patients can indicate the presence of risk, making it a useful diagnostic marker, as shown in Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Control (n=61) Mean ±SD</th>
<th>Patient (n=30) Mean ±SD</th>
<th>( P ) value</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (y)</td>
<td>26.16±4.25</td>
<td>26.96±4.06</td>
<td>0.176</td>
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<tr>
<td>MMP-9 (pg/mL)</td>
<td>12.19±4.90</td>
<td>49.34±1.08</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fetal fibronectin (pg/mL)</td>
<td>230.66±37.44</td>
<td>467.85±6.22</td>
<td>0.003</td>
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<tr>
<th>Correlation between IFN and MMP-9</th>
<th>Threatened miscarriages group, ( r ) value</th>
<th>( P ) value</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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<td>IFN and MMP</td>
<td>0.916</td>
<td>0.001</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>AUC</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
<th>Sensitivity</th>
<th>Specificity</th>
<th>95%CI</th>
<th>Cut-off</th>
<th>( P ) value</th>
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<tr>
<td>IFN</td>
<td>0.946</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>90.2%</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
<td>0.9-0.992</td>
<td>276.53</td>
<td>0.001</td>
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<td>MMP</td>
<td>0.872</td>
<td>0.045</td>
<td>83.6%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>0.78-0.96</td>
<td>15.67</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 1. Comprehensive between the mean ±SD of the two groups

Table 2. Correlation between IFN and MMP-9

Table 3. Specificity and sensitivity test for MMP-9 and IFN
The ability of MMP-9 levels in serum to diagnose threatened miscarriage was tested by analyzing the ROC curve (Table 3). The results indicate that high levels of MMP-9 in serum for patients with threatened miscarriage can indicate the presence of the risk, making it a useful diagnostic marker, as shown in Figure 2.

Discussion
Interactions between immune cells and trophoblasts are crucial for maintaining a healthy maternal-fetal interface during pregnancy. However, disruption in these interactions can lead to various pregnancy complications, such as spontaneous miscarriage (17). Embryo implantation, placenta development, and other physiological and clinical pregnancy processes are all tightly tied to matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs) and tissue inhibitors of MMP-9 (18).

The increased concentration of MMP-9 observed in the current study, may be a result of infection which causes an increase in tumor necrosis factor (TNF), an inflammatory cytokine, that induces a rise in MMP-9. Moreover, a retrospective nested cohort case-control study by Castruita-De la Rosa et al, on 34 pregnant women found that elevated serum concentrations of MMP-9 were associated with and preceded the appearance of spontaneous interruption of pregnancy (19).

Research has shown that elevated levels of serum MMP-9 may be a factor in spontaneous pregnancy loss, as demonstrated in a study of 129 women in their first trimester (13).

A previous prospective study aimed to investigate the expression of MMP-9 in endometrial curettage from 135 women with recurrent spontaneous miscarriages and 120 healthy pregnant women. The study found that imbalanced MMP-9 led to excessive endometrial matrix degradation ultimately affecting pregnancy outcomes and resulting in spontaneous miscarriage in women with recurrent infections (20).

Consistent with the findings of the current study, a case study of 30 spontaneous miscarriages and 20 requested miscarriages revealed that the mRNA expression level of MMP-9 in the spontaneous miscarriage group was higher than that in the requested miscarriage group (21).

In a previous study, conducted by researchers investigating the role of MMP-9 in recurrent pregnancy loss, specimens from the trophoblast, decidua basalis, and decidua parietalis of 40 first-trimester pregnant women were analyzed. The women were divided into two groups; those who experienced unexplained miscarriage, and those who had electively terminated pregnancies. Using immunohistochemical methods, the study found that MMP-9 levels were significantly higher in cases of recurrent pregnancy loss in both trophoblastic and decidual specimens ($P < 0.001$) (22).

The current study results revealed that fFN levels were higher in patients experiencing threatened miscarriage compared to those with health-pregnancy. Elevated fFN levels may indicate inflammation, infection, placental issues, or a direct cause of miscarriage.

Infection led to an increase in several cytokines such as interleukin-1 beta (IL-1β), tumor TNF alpha, and interleukin-6 (IL-6) which in turn enhance the production and expression of MMPs. This can cause degradation of the ECM and damage the uterine lining. Additionally, an insufficient placenta can weaken the attachment of the fetal sacs to the uterine wall, increasing the risk of miscarriage (23).

A study compared cervical mucus collected from 36 first-trimester pregnant women with and without bacterial vaginosis (BV) who were attending a family planning unit for first-trimester abortion. The study found that levels of fFN were significantly higher in women with bacterial vaginosis compared to those without bacterial vaginosis ($P < 0.05$) (24).
In a study, fFN levels were measured in both cervicovaginal secretions and plasma of 25 healthy pregnant women in the first or second trimester as well as 28 women who were scheduled to have an abortion. The result showed that patients who were about to have an abortion had significantly higher levels of fFN in both their serum and cervicovaginal secretions compared to healthy pregnant women (25). According to previous research, fFN was positive in 17 of 49 pregnant women with recurrent miscarriages and 11 of 35 successful pregnancies, with sensitivity and specificity of 43% and 69%, respectively (16).

The prognostic significance of fFN in early pregnancy embryonic loss in patients with recurrent spontaneous abortion. The study included 84 spontaneous miscarriage patients and 31 healthy women. There was a substantial difference in the incidence of spontaneous miscarriage between the test and control groups. In fFN (+) patients, the sensitivity, specificity, and positive predictive values for predicting abortion were 82.35%, 49.25%, 29.17%, and 91.67%, respectively (26). Vaginal hemorrhage and/or trophoblast were linked to a substantial rise in fibronectin levels in the Threatened miscarriage group which confirms the current study.

**Conclusion**

Our study found that increased levels of MMP-9 and fFN were linked with a higher risk of Threatened Miscarriage, which was often preceded by spontaneous pregnancy loss. Our findings imply that alterations in MMP and fFN control may play a role in Spontaneous miscarriage development.

**Limitations of the study**

The study encountered challenges in gathering samples, which required a considerable amount of time, as the study samples were particular to the stage of pregnancy and the population under investigation, as these cases were pregnant women experiencing problems at an ambiguous point in their pregnancy.

**Authors’ contribution**

- **Conceptualization:** Maha Saad Maki, Mohammed Shamil Ali, Hala Zghair Rawi.
- **Data curation:** Maha Saad Maki, Mohammed Shamil Ali, Hala Zghair Rawi.
- **Formal analysis:** Maha Saad Maki, Mohammed Shamil Ali, Hala Zghair Rawi.
- **Funding acquisition:** Maha Saad Maki, Mohammed Shamil Ali, Hala Zghair Rawi.
- **Investigation:** Maha Saad Maki, Mohammed Shamil Ali, Hala Zghair Rawi.
- **Methodology:** Maha Saad Maki, Mohammed Shamil Ali, Hala Zghair Rawi.
- **Project administration:** Maha Saad Maki, Mohammed Shamil Ali, Hala Zghair Rawi.
- **Resources:** Maha Saad Maki, Mohammed Shamil Ali, Hala Zghair Rawi.
- **Software:** Maha Saad Maki, Mohammed Shamil Ali, Hala Zghair Rawi.

**References**


**Funding/Support**

None.

**Ethical issues**

The research conducted in this study adhered to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Technology-Iraq Biometrics Committee in scientific research (Ethical code #BCSR6). Prior to any intervention, all participants provided written informed consent. The authors have fully complied with ethical issues, such as plagiarism, data fabrication, and double publication.

**Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.


