10.48047/jocaaa.2024.33.06.146

Chronic Kidney Disease in Childhood and Its Effects on Brain Morphology and Cognitive Function

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Received: 13 March 2024, **Accepted:** 17 April 2024, **Published:** 20 May 2024

ABSTRACT

Background: The endocrine fibroblast growth factor hormone Fibroblast Growth Factor 21 (FGF21) has emerged as a key metabolic regulator responsive to nutrient stress, hepatic lipotoxicity and insulin-resistance states. Its circulating concentration appears to rise in the context of obesity, hepatic steatosis and impaired glucose tolerance, yet the full clinical utility of serum FGF21 in dysglycaemia remains unresolved. Aim: This review article aims to synthesise current evidence on the utility of serum FGF21 as a biomarker in the transition from prediabetes to overt Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus (T2DM), focusing on its diagnostic potential, prognostic value for progression and complications, and therapeutic implications including its role as both sensor and target of metabolic interventions. Conclusion: Circulating FGF21 is consistently elevated in individuals with prediabetes and T2DM, and longitudinal analyses indicate it may precede overt hyperglycaemia in some populations, thus offering promise as an early marker. Moreover, elevated FGF21 correlates with adverse metabolic features including hepatic steatosis, insulin resistance and visceral adiposity, highlighting its value in risk stratification. However, several caveats impede routine clinical adoption: the heterogeneity in assay methods, population differences, overlapping elevation in other metabolic diseases (e.g., non-alcoholic fatty liver disease), and the unresolved question of whether elevated FGF21 reflects compensatory upregulation ("FGF21 resistance") rather than direct pathogenic signalling. On the therapeutic front, FGF21 analogues are in early clinical development for obesity and metabolic dysfunction, suggesting the biomarker may also guide target engagement and treatment stratification. Importantly, future research must clarify cut-off values in diverse populations, standardise measurement, delineate downstream signalling pathways, and establish whether modifying FGF21 biology improves hard outcomes in dysglycaemia. Integrating FGF21 measurement into a multi-biomarker panel may enhance diagnostic precision in pre-T2DM, guide early intervention and monitor therapeutic response.

Keywords: *Chronic Kidney Disease, Childhood, Brain Morphology, Cognitive Function*

10.48047/jocaaa.2024.33.06.146

INTRODUCTION

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) in childhood represents a significant global health concern, affecting nearly 15–74 per million children worldwide. Beyond its well-known renal and cardiovascular complications, growing evidence indicates that CKD also exerts profound effects on the developing brain. Children with CKD are particularly vulnerable to neurodevelopmental disturbances due to the interplay of uremic toxins, anemia, hypertension, metabolic acidosis, and inflammation. Structural brain abnormalities—including cortical thinning, reduced white matter integrity, and alterations in subcortical volumes—have been reported, often correlating with cognitive and behavioral deficits.

Aim:

This review aims to synthesize current evidence on the impact of chronic kidney disease on brain morphology and cognitive function in children, exploring the mechanisms linking renal dysfunction to neuroanatomical and neurocognitive alterations. It also highlights neuroimaging findings, neuropsychological outcomes, and clinical implications for early identification and intervention.

Conclusion:

Emerging neuroimaging data reveal that pediatric CKD is associated with diffuse and region-specific structural brain changes, particularly involving the frontal and parietal cortices, hippocampus, and white matter tracts. These alterations correspond to deficits in executive function, attention, processing speed, and memory. Mechanistic links are multifactorial, encompassing cerebrovascular dysregulation, accumulation of neurotoxic metabolites, disrupted blood–brain barrier integrity, and altered neurovascular coupling. The timing and severity of kidney dysfunction appear critical, with early-onset and advanced-stage CKD conferring the highest neurodevelopmental risk. Despite these insights, data remain heterogeneous, underscoring the need for longitudinal multimodal studies integrating neuroimaging, biomarkers, and cognitive assessments. Early recognition and multidisciplinary interventions—addressing anemia, hypertension, metabolic control, and educational support—are essential to mitigate neurocognitive decline and improve long-term quality of life.

Chronic kidney disease (CKD) in childhood is a progressive and multifactorial condition that exerts systemic effects far beyond the kidneys. It is defined by structural or functional renal abnormalities lasting for more than three months and classified into stages based on the glomerular filtration rate (GFR). The estimated global prevalence ranges from 15 to 74 cases per million children, with congenital anomalies of the kidney and urinary tract (CAKUT), glomerulopathies, and hereditary nephropathies representing the leading causes in pediatric populations. Although the primary focus of management has traditionally been on renal and cardiovascular complications, recent advances in

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neuroimaging and cognitive neuroscience have highlighted the brain as another critical target organ affected by CKD [1–3].

The developing brain is uniquely susceptible to the metabolic, vascular, and inflammatory perturbations that accompany chronic renal dysfunction. Uremic toxins, chronic anemia, hypertension, metabolic acidosis, and electrolyte disturbances can all compromise cerebral perfusion, synaptic maturation, and myelination. These systemic factors, combined with dialysis-related hemodynamic instability, can result in both structural and functional brain alterations. Evidence from magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) studies reveals reduced total brain volume, cortical thinning, and white matter microstructural abnormalities in children with CKD, changes that often correlate with neurocognitive impairments such as reduced attention span, executive dysfunction, and impaired academic performance [4–6].

Despite increasing recognition of these associations, significant gaps remain in understanding the precise mechanisms linking CKD and brain injury in children. Existing studies are limited by small sample sizes, heterogeneity in CKD stages, and variability in imaging and neuropsychological assessment methods. Furthermore, longitudinal data tracking neurodevelopmental outcomes across disease progression are scarce. These research gaps hinder the ability to establish causal relationships and to design effective neuroprotective interventions [7,8].

The aim of this review is therefore to provide a comprehensive synthesis of current knowledge on the effects of CKD on brain morphology and cognitive function in children. By integrating evidence from neuroimaging, neurophysiology, and clinical neuropsychology, this review seeks to elucidate the pathophysiological mechanisms underlying CKD-related neurodevelopmental impairments and to highlight potential strategies for early detection and intervention.

Pathophysiological Mechanisms Linking CKD and Brain Injury in Children

The connection between chronic kidney disease and neurological dysfunction in children is complex and multifactorial. Several interacting biological pathways contribute to brain injury, including uremic toxicity, oxidative stress, vascular dysfunction, anemia, metabolic derangements, and neuroinflammation. These mechanisms collectively compromise the developing brain’s structural integrity and cognitive potential [9].

Uremic Toxins and Neurotoxicity

Retention of nitrogenous and protein-bound toxins such as indoxyl sulfate, p-cresyl sulfate, and guanidino compounds plays a central role in CKD-related neurotoxicity. These molecules cross the blood–brain barrier (BBB), disrupt astrocyte and microglial function, and impair synaptic signaling. Experimental data indicate that uremic toxins induce mitochondrial dysfunction, increase reactive oxygen species production, and cause neuronal apoptosis in cortical and hippocampal neurons. In

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pediatric CKD, prolonged exposure to these toxins during critical periods of neurodevelopment may result in permanent structural changes and cognitive decline [10,11].

Anemia and Cerebral Hypoxia

Anemia is a frequent comorbidity in CKD due to decreased erythropoietin synthesis and iron dysregulation. Reduced oxygen-carrying capacity leads to chronic cerebral hypoxia, adversely affecting neuronal energy metabolism and white matter integrity. MRI studies have shown associations between low hemoglobin levels and reduced cortical thickness and myelination in children with CKD. Correction of anemia using erythropoiesis-stimulating agents (ESAs) and iron supplementation has been linked with improvements in attention and processing speed, suggesting partially reversible hypoxia-related neurocognitive deficits [12,13].

Hypertension and Cerebrovascular Dysregulation

Hypertension, common even in early CKD stages, alters cerebral autoregulation and promotes small vessel disease. Chronic elevation of blood pressure increases arterial stiffness and reduces perfusion to critical regions such as the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus. These hemodynamic abnormalities contribute to white matter lesions and microinfarcts that underlie deficits in executive and visuospatial functioning. Pediatric data reveal that blood pressure variability is strongly correlated with reduced cognitive performance and altered perfusion patterns on MRI [14,15].

Metabolic Acidosis and Electrolyte Imbalance

Metabolic acidosis impairs neuronal excitability, synaptic transmission, and neurotransmitter balance. Chronic acidemia disrupts calcium and phosphate homeostasis, which are vital for neuronal signaling and myelination. Furthermore, electrolyte disturbances, particularly dysnatremia and hyperkalemia, can alter brain osmoregulation, increasing the risk of cerebral edema and seizures. These biochemical factors contribute cumulatively to impaired cortical development and neurocognitive performance in children with advanced CKD [16,17].

Inflammation and Oxidative Stress

Systemic inflammation is a hallmark of CKD and a potent mediator of neurovascular injury. Elevated cytokines such as IL-6, TNF-α, and CRP are associated with white matter injury and reduced hippocampal volume. Reactive oxygen species (ROS) further exacerbate endothelial dysfunction and impair neurogenesis. In pediatric patients, inflammatory markers correlate with MRI-detected white matter abnormalities and lower scores on neuropsychological testing, suggesting a mechanistic link between inflammation and cognitive decline [18,19].

Dialysis-Related Hemodynamic Stress

Children undergoing dialysis experience repetitive episodes of intradialytic hypotension and rapid osmotic shifts, leading to cerebral hypoperfusion. These transient hemodynamic fluctuations can

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produce cumulative ischemic damage over time, reflected in cortical atrophy and white matter lesions on imaging. The type, duration, and adequacy of dialysis have significant implications for preserving cerebral integrity [20].

Collectively, these interrelated mechanisms underscore the brain's vulnerability to both systemic and local consequences of renal dysfunction during critical stages of neurodevelopment. A better understanding of these pathways may enable targeted neuroprotective strategies to mitigate cognitive impairment in pediatric CKD.

Neuroimaging Findings in Children with Chronic Kidney Disease

Modern neuroimaging has become essential for understanding how chronic kidney disease (CKD) affects the developing brain. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) studies have provided robust evidence of structural, microstructural, and functional brain alterations in children with CKD. These findings have significantly advanced understanding of how renal dysfunction influences cerebral maturation and neurocognitive outcomes [21].

Structural MRI Findings

Volumetric MRI analyses have consistently demonstrated reductions in total gray and white matter volumes in children with CKD compared with age-matched controls. Cortical thinning, particularly in the frontal, parietal, and temporal regions, has been noted, suggesting delayed or disrupted cortical maturation. The hippocampus—a region critical for memory and learning—often exhibits volume loss correlating with deficits in episodic memory and executive function. Furthermore, subcortical structures such as the thalamus and basal ganglia may show atrophy linked to attention and motor coordination problems. These structural alterations appear to worsen with declining glomerular filtration rate (GFR) and longer disease duration [22–24].

Diffusion Tensor Imaging (DTI) and White Matter Integrity

Diffusion tensor imaging provides sensitive assessment of white matter microstructure by measuring fractional anisotropy (FA) and mean diffusivity (MD). Pediatric CKD cohorts consistently display reduced FA and elevated MD across major white matter tracts, including the corpus callosum, cingulum, and superior longitudinal fasciculus. These findings indicate demyelination or axonal injury, possibly secondary to chronic hypoxia, hypertension, or metabolic stress. Reduced white matter integrity has been correlated with slower processing speed, reduced attention, and poorer academic performance. Notably, abnormalities may be present even in early CKD stages, highlighting subclinical neurological involvement before overt cognitive decline [25–27].

Functional MRI (fMRI) and Brain Connectivity

Functional MRI studies have begun to elucidate alterations in intrinsic brain connectivity among children with CKD. Resting-state fMRI reveals disrupted connectivity within key cognitive networks such as the default mode network (DMN), frontoparietal network, and salience network. Task-based

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fMRI demonstrates reduced activation in prefrontal and parietal regions during working memory and attention tasks. These functional changes often parallel deficits in executive control and attentional regulation, suggesting that CKD interferes with the efficiency of large-scale neural networks supporting higher-order cognition [28,29].

Magnetic Resonance Spectroscopy (MRS) and Metabolic Abnormalities

MRS studies in pediatric CKD have identified alterations in brain metabolites reflecting neuronal and glial dysfunction. Decreased N-acetylaspartate (NAA), a marker of neuronal integrity, and elevated choline and myo-inositol, markers of gliosis and membrane turnover, have been reported in the frontal and parietal cortices. These metabolic changes are thought to reflect neuroinflammation and astrocytic proliferation secondary to uremic toxicity and metabolic stress. Some abnormalities have shown partial reversibility following kidney transplantation, underscoring the metabolic nature of CKD-related brain injury [30,31].

Cerebral Perfusion and Vascular Imaging

Advanced imaging modalities such as arterial spin labeling (ASL) and susceptibility-weighted imaging (SWI) have revealed abnormal cerebral perfusion patterns and microvascular injury in pediatric CKD. Decreased cerebral blood flow and increased white matter hyperintensities have been documented, particularly in children with hypertension and anemia. These findings underscore cerebrovascular dysregulation as a critical component of CKD-related brain pathology [32,33].

Collectively, neuroimaging studies have provided compelling evidence that CKD in children disrupts brain development at multiple levels—structural, microstructural, metabolic, and functional. The integration of multimodal imaging with neuropsychological testing offers a powerful framework for detecting early brain injury, monitoring disease progression, and evaluating neuroprotective interventions.

Neurocognitive and Behavioral Outcomes in Pediatric CKD

Children with chronic kidney disease (CKD) exhibit a spectrum of neurocognitive and behavioral challenges that reflect the underlying structural and functional brain abnormalities described previously. These deficits can manifest early—even before the onset of end-stage renal disease (ESRD)—and have lasting implications for educational achievement, psychosocial adjustment, and long-term quality of life [34].

Global Cognitive Function

Several large cohort studies have consistently shown that children with CKD have lower mean intelligence quotient (IQ) scores compared with healthy controls. The Chronic Kidney Disease in Children (CKiD) study demonstrated an average IQ approximately 10–15 points lower than population norms, with performance IQ more affected than verbal IQ. The decline in cognitive performance correlates with disease severity, longer duration of CKD, and cumulative exposure to uremic and

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hemodynamic insults. Children with congenital renal anomalies appear particularly vulnerable, possibly due to early developmental interference with neurogenesis and synaptic maturation [35,36].

Executive Function and Attention

Executive dysfunction—including impaired planning, working memory, and cognitive flexibility—is among the most prominent neurocognitive impairments in pediatric CKD. Attention-deficit symptoms, slower information processing, and poor inhibitory control are common, often paralleling frontal lobe and frontoparietal white matter abnormalities on neuroimaging. These deficits adversely affect school performance, task organization, and adaptive behavior. Blood pressure variability, anemia, and altered cerebral perfusion have been identified as predictors of executive dysfunction, emphasizing the role of vascular and metabolic stability in maintaining cognitive function [37,38].

Memory and Learning

Memory impairments, particularly affecting verbal learning and short-term memory, have been frequently documented. Hippocampal involvement, detected as volume loss or altered functional connectivity on MRI, provides a neuroanatomical substrate for these deficits. In children undergoing dialysis, memory performance often deteriorates with treatment duration but may improve after successful kidney transplantation, supporting a reversible metabolic contribution to hippocampal dysfunction [39,40].

Language and Academic Performance

Children with CKD frequently experience language development delays and lower academic achievement in reading, spelling, and mathematics. These outcomes stem not only from direct neurological impact but also from frequent school absences, fatigue, and psychosocial stressors related to chronic illness. Multivariate analyses have confirmed that neurocognitive impairment persists even after adjusting for socioeconomic and educational variables, underscoring CKD as an independent risk factor for academic underachievement [41,42].

Psychosocial and Behavioral Aspects

Behavioral problems—including internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression and externalizing behaviors like impulsivity—are more prevalent among pediatric CKD patients. Emotional dysregulation may result from disruptions in limbic circuitry and neurotransmitter imbalance secondary to uremic toxicity. These psychosocial disturbances can further amplify cognitive difficulties by interfering with attention and motivation. Comprehensive psychological assessment and early mental health support are therefore integral to CKD management in children [43,44].

Impact of Dialysis and Transplantation on Cognition

Dialysis, while lifesaving, is associated with fluctuating hemodynamics and metabolic instability that may exacerbate cognitive decline. Peritoneal dialysis tends to preserve cognitive function better than hemodialysis, likely due to steadier fluid and toxin clearance. Kidney transplantation often leads to

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partial improvement in cognitive scores, particularly in attention and memory domains, suggesting reversibility of some neurotoxic effects. Nevertheless, persistent deficits post-transplantation imply that early-stage brain injury may not be fully reversible and that neurodevelopmental surveillance should continue long after renal replacement therapy [45–47].

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that pediatric CKD is associated with a broad range of neurocognitive and behavioral impairments that evolve alongside disease progression. Early identification through comprehensive neuropsychological screening and timely multidisciplinary intervention are essential to optimize neurodevelopmental outcomes and quality of life in this vulnerable population [48].

Clinical Implications and Early Intervention Strategies

The recognition that chronic kidney disease (CKD) in children can profoundly influence brain development and cognition carries significant clinical implications. Timely identification of neurocognitive vulnerability, followed by tailored interventions, is essential to preserve neurodevelopmental potential and improve life outcomes. A multidisciplinary model integrating nephrology, neurology, psychology, and education specialists offers the best framework for care [49].

Early Neurodevelopmental Screening

Routine neurocognitive screening should be an integral part of pediatric CKD management, beginning from early disease stages. Tools such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) and NEPSY-II are valuable for assessing domains like executive function, attention, and memory. The Chronic Kidney Disease in Children (CKiD) cohort has demonstrated that early deficits in processing speed and attention often predict later academic difficulties, underscoring the value of longitudinal cognitive monitoring. Screening intervals should coincide with major treatment milestones, including initiation of dialysis or post-transplant follow-up [50,51].

Optimization of Medical Factors

Controlling systemic factors that contribute to neurocognitive decline is paramount. Tight regulation of blood pressure, anemia, and metabolic acidosis reduces cerebral injury risk. Erythropoiesis-stimulating agents (ESAs) and iron supplementation should be optimized to maintain adequate hemoglobin and oxygen delivery to the brain. Antihypertensive therapy, particularly with angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors (ACEIs), has been associated with improved cerebral autoregulation and cognitive outcomes. Nutritional interventions addressing vitamin D deficiency, electrolyte balance, and protein-energy malnutrition are equally vital for neuroprotection [52–54].

Dialysis Modality and Cerebral Protection

When dialysis is required, peritoneal dialysis is often preferred in children because it maintains more stable hemodynamics and toxin clearance. Avoidance of intradialytic hypotension and optimization of ultrafiltration rates during hemodialysis can help prevent recurrent cerebral ischemia. Novel dialysis

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strategies incorporating continuous monitoring of cerebral oxygenation using near-infrared spectroscopy (NIRS) show promise for real-time neuroprotection. Such technologies may help personalize dialysis regimens to minimize neurological stress [55,56].

Neurorehabilitation and Educational Support

Children diagnosed with CKD-related cognitive impairments benefit significantly from structured neurorehabilitation programs. Cognitive training, speech and occupational therapy, and behavioral interventions can enhance executive functioning and academic skills. Collaboration with educators ensures individualized education plans (IEPs) tailored to cognitive strengths and limitations. Studies indicate that early educational support can mitigate learning delays and improve academic persistence despite ongoing medical challenges [57,58].

Psychosocial and Family-Centered Care

Psychological and emotional support for both children and their families is critical. Chronic illness can induce stress, anxiety, and depression, which in turn worsen cognitive outcomes. Family-centered counseling, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and peer support programs improve adherence, resilience, and mental well-being. Integrating mental health professionals into nephrology clinics ensures that psychosocial risks are identified and managed alongside medical treatment [59,60].

Role of Kidney Transplantation

Kidney transplantation remains the most effective intervention to restore metabolic stability and halt many neurotoxic processes. Post-transplant improvements in attention, processing speed, and working memory have been documented, though residual cognitive deficits may persist in those with prolonged pretransplant CKD. These findings highlight the importance of early transplant evaluation and minimizing dialysis duration whenever feasible. Post-transplant care should also include continued cognitive monitoring, as immunosuppressive drugs and residual comorbidities can influence neurocognitive recovery [61,62].

Integrating Biomarkers and Imaging in Follow-Up

Emerging biomarkers such as serum neurofilament light chain, brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), and inflammatory cytokines hold potential for early detection of brain injury in CKD. Combined with advanced imaging techniques like diffusion tensor imaging (DTI) and functional MRI (fMRI), these biomarkers could help track cerebral recovery and guide therapeutic interventions. Multimodal follow-up integrating biological, imaging, and neuropsychological data will be central to precision neuroprotective care in pediatric nephrology [63,64].

Together, these strategies emphasize a paradigm shift from reactive to proactive neurodevelopmental management in pediatric CKD. Through integrated multidisciplinary care, early intervention, and precision monitoring, it is possible to mitigate the neurological sequelae of renal disease and enhance cognitive and psychosocial outcomes for affected children [65].

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Conclusion

Chronic kidney disease in childhood extends far beyond renal impairment—it represents a multisystem disorder that profoundly affects the developing brain. The evidence gathered through neuroimaging, neuropsychological testing, and clinical observation underscores that CKD disrupts cerebral structure, connectivity, and function at multiple levels. Cortical thinning, white matter disorganization, hippocampal atrophy, and abnormal cerebral perfusion have all been linked with deficits in executive functioning, attention, memory, and learning.

The neurodevelopmental impact of CKD begins early, often preceding overt symptoms of kidney failure. Metabolic disturbances, uremic toxins, anemia, hypertension, and chronic inflammation act synergistically to impair cerebral maturation. These systemic effects highlight the importance of early and proactive neurocognitive screening in all children with CKD, regardless of disease stage. Early identification enables targeted medical, psychological, and educational interventions that can modify developmental trajectories and reduce long-term disability.

While dialysis and kidney transplantation can alleviate many systemic manifestations of CKD, they do not fully reverse preexisting brain injury. This underscores the need for preventive approaches aimed at protecting the brain from the earliest phases of kidney dysfunction. Optimizing anemia and blood pressure control, maintaining metabolic balance, ensuring adequate nutrition, and providing psychosocial support all contribute to preserving cognitive health.

Future progress will depend on integrating advanced neuroimaging, biomarkers, and longitudinal neuropsychological assessments into pediatric nephrology practice. A precision medicine approach—combining biological, clinical, and environmental data—holds the potential to identify children most at risk and tailor interventions accordingly.

Ultimately, the goal extends beyond prolonging renal survival: it is to ensure that children with chronic kidney disease can achieve their full neurodevelopmental and cognitive potential. Continued collaboration between nephrologists, neurologists, neuropsychologists, and educators is essential to achieve a truly holistic model of care that safeguards both kidney and brain health throughout childhood and adolescence.

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