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Pediatric Inflammatory Bowel Disease: Crohn's Disease and Ulcerative Colitis, Diagnostic Advances, and Modern Therapeutic Approaches

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Abstract: Pediatric inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) is a chronic, immune-mediated disorder of the gastrointestinal tract that primarily includes Crohn's disease (CD) and ulcerative colitis (UC). These conditions represent an important challenge in pediatric medicine because they may interfere with growth, nutritional status, puberty, psychological development, and quality of life. Although Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis share several clinical manifestations, they differ in anatomical distribution, pathological characteristics, and long-term complications. Crohn's disease can affect any part of the gastrointestinal tract and is associated with transmural inflammation, strictures, fistulas, and perianal disease. Ulcerative colitis mainly involves continuous mucosal inflammation of the colon, frequently presenting with bloody diarrhea, urgency, and abdominal discomfort. Recent advances in pediatric gastroenterology have improved diagnostic accuracy through fecal calprotectin, endoscopic evaluation, histopathology, magnetic resonance enterography, and intestinal ultrasound. Treatment has shifted from controlling symptoms alone toward a treat-to-target strategy focused on sustained clinical remission, biochemical control, mucosal healing, normal growth, and prevention of intestinal damage. Nutritional therapy, corticosteroids, immunomodulators, biologic agents, targeted small molecules, and surgery are used according to disease severity and individual risk factors. Early recognition, multidisciplinary care, and personalized treatment are essential for improving long-term outcomes in children with IBD.

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Introduction

Inflammatory bowel disease is a chronic relapsing condition caused by an inappropriate immune response to intestinal microorganisms in genetically susceptible individuals. The disease develops through the interaction of genetic predisposition, intestinal barrier dysfunction, microbiome alterations, immune dysregulation, and environmental influences. Pediatric IBD is particularly significant because it frequently develops during periods of rapid physical growth and neuropsychological development. Persistent intestinal inflammation may lead to reduced appetite, malabsorption, anemia, weight loss, growth retardation, delayed puberty, and recurrent hospitalization. In addition, children may experience difficulties with school attendance, social relationships, physical activity, and emotional well-being.

Etiology and Pathophysiology

The pathogenesis of pediatric IBD is multifactorial. Genetic susceptibility influences intestinal epithelial integrity, microbial recognition, and immune regulation. Some patients, particularly those with very early-onset IBD, may have monogenic disorders involving immune pathways, including defects in immune regulation and intestinal barrier function. Monogenic disease should be considered in children with onset during infancy or early childhood, severe or atypical inflammation, recurrent infections, unusual family history, or poor response to conventional therapy.

The intestinal microbiome plays an important role in maintaining mucosal homeostasis. Changes in bacterial diversity and microbial composition may influence intestinal permeability and stimulate an abnormal immune response. Environmental factors, including dietary patterns, antibiotic exposure, infections, urbanization, and other lifestyle-related influences, may contribute to disease development. However, no single environmental factor explains all cases of pediatric IBD.

In Crohn's disease, inflammatory activity may extend through the entire intestinal wall. This transmural process can produce deep ulceration, fibrosis, intestinal narrowing, fistula formation, and abscesses. The terminal ileum and colon are commonly affected, although isolated small-bowel or upper gastrointestinal disease can occur. Ulcerative colitis produces inflammation that generally begins in the rectum and extends proximally in a continuous pattern. Disease extent may vary from proctitis to left-sided colitis or extensive pancolitis. Severe mucosal inflammation can result in significant blood loss, protein loss, systemic inflammation, and, in rare cases, toxic megacolon.

Inflammation also produces systemic consequences. Increased metabolic requirements, decreased food intake, intestinal losses, and malabsorption may result in iron deficiency, vitamin deficiencies, hypoalbuminemia, and impaired growth. Extraintestinal manifestations can affect the joints, skin, eyes,

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liver, and biliary tract. For this reason, pediatric IBD should be managed as a systemic disease rather than an isolated intestinal disorder.

Clinical Manifestations and Diagnosis

Magnetic resonance enterography is widely used to assess small-bowel involvement, bowel-wall thickening, strictures, fistulas, and abscesses without ionizing radiation. Intestinal ultrasound has become an increasingly useful monitoring tool because it is non-invasive, repeatable, and suitable for children. It can help evaluate bowel-wall thickness, vascularity, and inflammatory changes, although accuracy depends on operator experience and equipment. These techniques complement rather than completely replace endoscopy and histology.

The differential diagnosis includes gastrointestinal infections, celiac disease, intestinal parasitosis, food-related enteropathies, intestinal tuberculosis in relevant epidemiological settings, immunodeficiency-associated enteropathy, vasculitis, intestinal polyps, and functional gastrointestinal disorders. In very young children, monogenic immune disorders should be considered. A structured diagnostic strategy reduces the risk of delayed diagnosis and inappropriate treatment.

Modern Therapeutic Approaches

The main objectives of pediatric IBD treatment are to achieve and maintain remission, control intestinal inflammation, support normal growth and puberty, prevent complications, minimize medication toxicity, and improve quality of life. Contemporary management follows a treat-to-target approach, in which clinical symptoms are combined with objective measures such as inflammatory biomarkers, endoscopic findings, imaging, and growth parameters. Symptomatic improvement alone is insufficient because ongoing subclinical inflammation may result in progressive intestinal damage.

Nutritional therapy has a particularly important role in pediatric Crohn's disease. Exclusive enteral nutrition can induce remission in selected children with active luminal disease while improving nutritional status and avoiding some adverse effects of corticosteroids. It is usually implemented under specialist supervision with an individualized nutritional plan. Partial enteral nutrition and structured exclusion diets may also be considered in selected patients. Dietary interventions should not lead to inadequate calorie intake, excessive food restriction, or micronutrient deficiency. A pediatric dietitian should participate in the treatment plan, especially when the child has growth impairment, weight loss, or multiple food exclusions.

Corticosteroids are effective for inducing remission in moderate or severe inflammatory disease, but they are not suitable for long-term maintenance because of their adverse effects. Prolonged exposure may cause growth suppression, osteoporosis, hypertension, glucose intolerance, infection risk, mood changes, and adrenal suppression. Consequently, corticosteroids should generally be used for the shortest clinically appropriate period, with a clear plan for steroid-sparing maintenance treatment.

Therapeutic drug monitoring is an important component of biologic treatment optimization. Measurement of serum drug concentrations and anti-drug antibodies may help explain inadequate response, loss of response, or accelerated drug clearance. Proactive monitoring in selected clinical

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settings and reactive monitoring when treatment failure occurs can support individualized dose optimization. Decisions should consider clinical symptoms, biomarkers, endoscopic findings, drug levels, and the overall disease course rather than relying on a single laboratory measurement.

Additional advanced therapies include vedolizumab, which acts through gut-selective inhibition of lymphocyte trafficking, and biologics targeting interleukin pathways, including interleukin-12 and interleukin-23. Small-molecule therapies, such as Janus kinase inhibitors, may have a role in selected cases of ulcerative colitis, depending on the patient's age, local regulatory approval, disease severity, and safety profile. Pediatric use of newer agents requires specialist supervision because long-term evidence in children may be more limited than in adults. Infection screening, vaccination review, and ongoing safety monitoring are essential before and during immunosuppressive treatment.

Differences in the Management of Crohn's Disease and Ulcerative Colitis

Treatment of Crohn's disease is determined by disease location, inflammatory activity, and behavior, including inflammatory, stricturing, penetrating, and perianal phenotypes. Mild inflammatory disease may be managed with nutritional therapy or selected pharmacological treatment, whereas children with high-risk features may require early advanced therapy. Strictures, fistulas, abscesses, severe malnutrition, persistent growth failure, and extensive inflammation require close multidisciplinary evaluation. Surgery may be necessary for obstruction, perforation, abscesses, localized medically refractory disease, or serious complications. However, surgery does not permanently cure Crohn's disease because inflammation can recur in other intestinal segments or at anastomotic sites.

Conclusion

Pediatric inflammatory bowel disease is a complex chronic condition that can significantly affect intestinal function, physical growth, nutritional status, and psychosocial development. Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis have distinct pathological and clinical characteristics, but both require early diagnosis, objective assessment, and individualized long-term management. Advances in fecal calprotectin, endoscopy, histopathology, magnetic resonance enterography, and intestinal ultrasound have improved diagnostic and monitoring capabilities. Modern treatment emphasizes a treat-to-target strategy that aims not only to relieve symptoms but also to achieve biochemical control, mucosal healing, normal growth, and prevention of irreversible complications. Nutritional therapy, corticosteroids, immunomodulators, biologic agents, targeted therapies, and surgery should be selected according to disease phenotype, severity, risk factors, and treatment response. Multidisciplinary care and continued research into precision medicine will remain essential for improving the long-term health and quality of life of children with inflammatory bowel disease.

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