# Role of Angiotensin-Converting Enzyme Polymorphisms in the Pathogenesis and Outcomes of Neonatal Sepsis

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**Conflict of interest:** None declared.
**Funding:** No funding sources

## Abstract

Neonatal sepsis remains a critical concern in neonatology, with significant morbidity and mortality worldwide. Recent advances in genetic research have highlighted the potential role of angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) polymorphisms in influencing susceptibility, disease progression, and outcomes in neonatal sepsis. This review aims to consolidate current evidence on the association between ACE gene polymorphisms, particularly the insertion/deletion (I/D) polymorphism, and neonatal sepsis. We explore the underlying molecular mechanisms, including ACE's role in the renin-angiotensin system, inflammation, and immune response modulation. Furthermore, we discuss findings from epidemiological studies examining the prevalence of ACE polymorphisms in septic neonates, as well as their potential use as biomarkers for risk stratification and therapeutic targeting. Challenges such as genetic variability across populations, small sample sizes, and heterogeneity in study designs are also addressed. By integrating genetic insights with clinical implications, this review provides a comprehensive understanding of ACE polymorphisms in neonatal sepsis and identifies gaps for future research to improve prevention and management strategies.

**Keywords:** Angiotensin-Converting Enzyme, neonatal sepsis

**Tob Regul Sci. ™ 2023 ;9(1): 8821-8830**
**DOI : doi.org/10.18001/TRS.9.1.626**

## Introduction

Neonatal sepsis is a severe condition characterized by systemic infection in neonates during the first 28 days of life. It remains a significant cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. The condition can be categorized into early-onset sepsis (EOS) and late-onset sepsis (LOS), differentiated by the timing of infection and implicated pathogens [1]. EOS, typically occurring within the first 72 hours of life, is often caused by pathogens acquired during delivery, whereas LOS, occurring after the first week, is commonly associated with nosocomial infections or community-acquired pathogens [2].

The etiology of neonatal sepsis varies by geographical location, delivery practices, and healthcare infrastructure. Group B Streptococcus (GBS) and Escherichia coli are the predominant pathogens in EOS in developed countries, while Klebsiella spp. and other Gram-negative bacteria are more common in resource-limited settings [3]. LOS pathogens include coagulase-negative staphylococci (CoNS), Staphylococcus aureus, and fungal agents such as Candida spp. The variation in pathogen prevalence underscores the need for region-specific epidemiological data to guide empiric treatment strategies [4].

Pathogenesis of neonatal sepsis is a multifactorial process involving microbial invasion, immune dysregulation, and systemic inflammatory responses. The immature neonatal immune system, characterized by reduced neutrophil functionality, limited complement activity, and impaired cytokine responses, increases susceptibility to infection [5]. Moreover, predisposing factors such as premature birth, invasive procedures, and maternal infections exacerbate this vulnerability [6].

Key clinical features of neonatal sepsis include respiratory distress, temperature instability, feeding intolerance, lethargy, and cardiovascular compromise. These nonspecific symptoms can overlap with other neonatal conditions, making early diagnosis challenging [7]. Diagnostic approaches often rely on blood cultures, though their sensitivity is limited. Emerging biomarkers such as procalcitonin, C-reactive protein (CRP), and interleukin-6 (IL-6) are being investigated for improved diagnostic accuracy [8].

The role of molecular diagnostics has expanded significantly in recent years. Polymerase chain reaction (PCR)-based assays and next-generation sequencing (NGS) enable rapid identification of pathogens and resistance determinants, reducing the time to diagnosis and guiding targeted therapy [9]. Despite these advances, access to molecular diagnostics remains limited in resource-constrained settings.

Treatment of neonatal sepsis involves prompt initiation of empiric antibiotic therapy, often with a combination of ampicillin and gentamicin for EOS, and vancomycin with ceftazidime or meropenem for LOS [10]. Antifungal agents such as fluconazole are employed in suspected or confirmed fungal infections. The rise of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), particularly in Gram-negative pathogens, poses a significant challenge, necessitating the development of novel antimicrobials and stewardship programs [11].

Immunotherapy and adjunctive treatments are areas of ongoing research. Intravenous immunoglobulins (IVIG) and granulocyte-macrophage colony-stimulating factor (GM-CSF) have been explored for their potential to modulate immune responses, though their efficacy remains inconclusive [12]. Probiotics and lactoferrin have shown promise in preventing LOS, particularly in preterm infants, by enhancing gut microbiota and mucosal immunity [13].

Prevention strategies focus on maternal screening and intrapartum antibiotic prophylaxis (IAP) for GBS, sterile delivery practices, and stringent infection control measures in neonatal intensive care units (NICUs). Breastfeeding has been demonstrated to reduce sepsis risk through the transfer of protective immunoglobulins and other antimicrobial components [14].

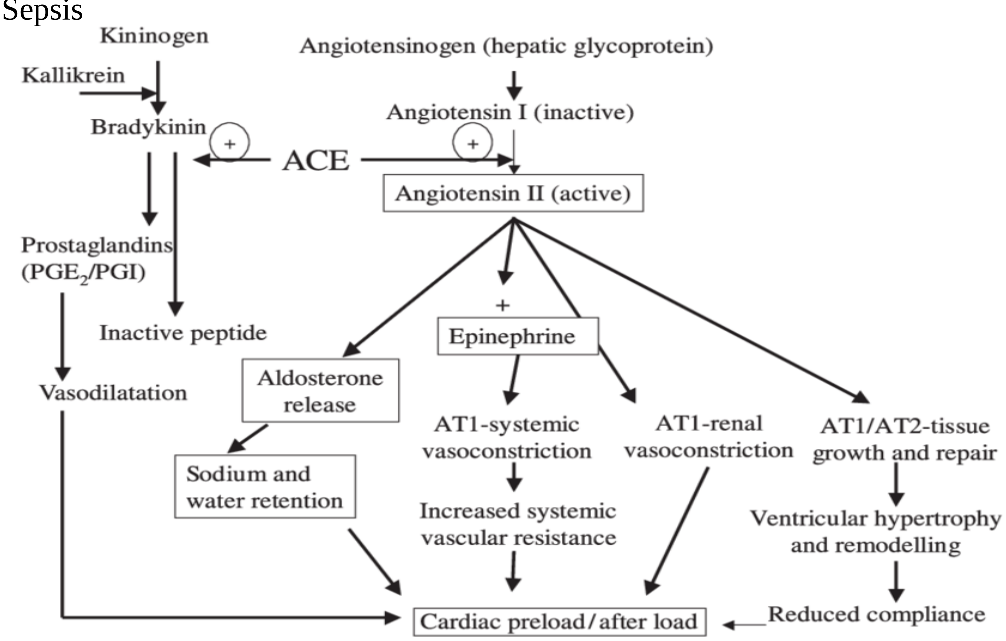
Advancements in immunology have deepened our understanding of neonatal immune responses. Toll-like receptors (TLRs) and other pattern recognition receptors (PRRs) play critical roles in pathogen recognition and the activation of innate immune pathways. Dysregulation of these pathways contributes to the exaggerated inflammatory responses observed in sepsis [15].

From a microbiological perspective, biofilm formation by pathogens like CoNS and Candida spp. complicates the treatment of LOS, particularly in neonates with central venous catheters [16]. Efforts to develop anti-biofilm therapies, such as quorum-sensing inhibitors, are underway.

The interplay between microbiology and immunology highlights the complexity of neonatal sepsis. For instance, the presence of certain polymorphisms in genes encoding cytokines, complement proteins, and TLRs has been linked to differential susceptibility and outcomes in sepsis. Genetic studies provide insights into individualized risk assessment and potential therapeutic targets [17].

Despite progress, neonatal sepsis remains a pressing global health issue. Bridging gaps in diagnostics, treatment, and prevention requires multidisciplinary collaboration and equitable resource allocation. Future research should prioritize the development of affordable diagnostic tools, novel antimicrobials, and effective vaccines tailored to neonatal populations [18].

The renin-angiotensin system (RAS) plays a pivotal role in the regulation of blood pressure and fluid homeostasis. However, its involvement extends beyond these traditional functions to include significant contributions to the pathophysiology of sepsis. This complex regulatory system, through angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) and angiotensin II (Ang II), influences inflammatory responses and immune cell function, with implications for both the progression and severity of sepsis [19].



Schematic representation of the role of angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) in the renin-angiotensin-aldosterone cascade and in bradykinin cleavage. Angiotensin II is a potent vasoconstrictor of the systemic and renal vascular bed. These effects are mediated by AngII type I (AT1) receptor. In addition, AngII modulates tissue growth and repair in the kidney and cardiovascular system by acting on both AT1 and AT2 receptors. Vasoconstriction and stimulation of aldosterone synthesis and release (which leads to sodium retention) have a tendency to elevate blood pressure. These effects, including those on tissue growth, vascular and cardiac hypertrophy and remodelling, are thought to be involved in progressive cardiovascular and renal dysfunction. ACE inhibition results in decreased plasma AngII concentrations which in turn lead a decrease in plasma aldosterone level.

ACE, a key enzyme in the RAS, is expressed not only in vascular endothelial cells but also in tissues by activated macrophages and T lymphocytes. Tissue-derived ACE has been shown to dysregulate inflammatory responses, exacerbating the pathogenesis of sepsis. This dysregulation includes heightened cytokine production and amplification of systemic inflammation, key hallmarks of sepsis [20]. Elevated ACE activity correlates with increased levels of Ang II, which acts through angiotensin type 1 receptors (AT1Rs) to mediate pro-inflammatory effects such as oxidative stress, vascular leakage, and endothelial dysfunction [21].

Immune cells, including T and B lymphocytes, macrophages, and neutrophils, express AT1Rs. Activation of these receptors by Ang II influences cell recruitment, cytokine release, and phagocytosis. In macrophages, AT1R stimulation enhances the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines like tumor necrosis factor-α (TNF-α) and interleukin-6 (IL-6), amplifying systemic inflammatory responses [22]. Neutrophils, critical first responders in sepsis, exhibit altered migration and impaired bacterial killing when exposed to excessive Ang II signaling [23].

The balance between pro-inflammatory and anti-inflammatory pathways in the RAS is regulated by angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE2), which degrades Ang II to angiotensin-(1-7), a peptide with anti-inflammatory and vasodilatory effects. However, in sepsis, ACE2 expression is often downregulated, tipping the balance towards Ang II-mediated inflammation and tissue damage. This imbalance contributes to microvascular thrombosis, organ dysfunction, and mortality in septic patients [24].

Evidence suggests that genetic polymorphisms in the ACE gene may influence susceptibility to sepsis and its outcomes. For instance, the ACE insertion/deletion (I/D) polymorphism has been associated with variations in ACE activity and Ang II levels. Individuals with the D allele, associated with higher ACE activity, may be at greater risk of severe sepsis and poorer outcomes due to enhanced pro-inflammatory signaling [25].

The interplay between RAS and other inflammatory pathways further complicates its role in sepsis. Cross-talk between Ang II and Toll-like receptor (TLR) signaling amplifies the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and pro-inflammatory cytokines. This synergy exacerbates endothelial injury, a critical factor in the progression of septic shock and multiple organ failure [26].

Therapeutic strategies targeting the RAS hold promise for mitigating sepsis-induced damage. Angiotensin receptor blockers (ARBs) and ACE inhibitors, widely used in cardiovascular diseases, have demonstrated potential in reducing inflammation and improving outcomes in experimental sepsis models. Additionally, recombinant ACE2 therapy has shown efficacy in restoring the balance between Ang II and angiotensin-(1-7), thereby mitigating inflammation and organ injury [27].

Understanding the dual role of RAS in promoting and resolving inflammation highlights its complexity in sepsis pathophysiology. While pro-inflammatory effects dominate during the acute phase of sepsis, the anti-inflammatory actions of angiotensin-(1-7) and ACE2 are essential for resolving inflammation and promoting tissue repair. This dynamic interplay underscores the need for precise therapeutic interventions that consider the temporal phases of sepsis [28].

Future research should focus on elucidating the molecular mechanisms underlying RAS modulation in sepsis, identifying biomarkers for patient stratification, and developing targeted therapies. Advances in this field may pave the way for innovative treatment strategies that improve outcomes for septic patients by modulating the RAS to balance immune responses and prevent organ dysfunction [29].

## ACE Polymorphism and Neonatal Sepsis: A Detailed Overview

Neonatal sepsis is a significant cause of morbidity and mortality among neonates, particularly in low-birth-weight and preterm infants. Recent advancements in genetic studies have identified angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) polymorphisms as a potential factor influencing susceptibility to neonatal sepsis. ACE polymorphism, particularly the insertion/deletion (I/D) variant, has been implicated in modulating immune responses and inflammatory processes in neonates [30].

ACE plays a central role in the renin-angiotensin system (RAS), primarily by converting angiotensin I to angiotensin II, a potent vasoconstrictor and pro-inflammatory molecule. In neonatal sepsis, tissue-derived ACE expression by activated macrophages and T lymphocytes has been shown to amplify systemic inflammation. This dysregulation is critical to understanding how genetic variations in the ACE gene affect neonatal sepsis outcomes [31].

The ACE I/D polymorphism, characterized by the presence (insertion) or absence (deletion) of a 287-base pair fragment in intron 16 of the ACE gene, is associated with variations in ACE plasma levels. The D allele correlates with higher ACE activity, while the I allele is associated with lower activity. Studies suggest that neonates carrying the D allele may experience a heightened inflammatory response, predisposing them to severe sepsis and worse clinical outcomes [32].

In addition to influencing inflammatory processes, ACE polymorphism affects vascular permeability and endothelial function. Angiotensin II, mediated through angiotensin type 1 receptors (AT1Rs), contributes to microvascular thrombosis and endothelial injury, exacerbating organ dysfunction in sepsis. Neonates with higher ACE activity may be at increased risk of these complications, further underscoring the relevance of ACE polymorphisms in the pathogenesis of neonatal sepsis [33].

Population-based studies reveal significant variability in the prevalence of the ACE I/D polymorphism, with geographical and ethnic differences influencing its distribution. For example, a higher frequency of the D allele has been observed in European populations compared to Asian populations. This variability highlights the need for region-specific studies to understand the genetic risk factors for neonatal sepsis in diverse populations [34].

The interplay between ACE polymorphism and other genetic factors further complicates its role in neonatal sepsis. Polymorphisms in genes encoding cytokines, Toll-like receptors (TLRs), and complement proteins have been shown to interact with ACE polymorphisms, influencing immune responses and sepsis susceptibility. Understanding these genetic interactions could provide insights into the multifactorial nature of neonatal sepsis [35].

From an immunological perspective, ACE polymorphism influences the activation of key immune cells, including macrophages, neutrophils, and lymphocytes. Angiotensin II signaling through AT1Rs enhances pro-inflammatory cytokine production and reactive oxygen species (ROS) generation, contributing to the hyper-inflammatory state characteristic of sepsis. Neonates with higher ACE activity may experience exaggerated immune responses, resulting in greater tissue damage [36].

Despite the growing evidence linking ACE polymorphism to neonatal sepsis, challenges remain in translating these findings into clinical practice. Diagnostic approaches incorporating genetic testing for ACE polymorphisms are still in their infancy. The development of rapid, cost-effective genetic assays could facilitate early identification of high-risk neonates and enable personalized interventions [37].

Therapeutic strategies targeting the RAS, such as angiotensin receptor blockers (ARBs) and ACE inhibitors, have shown promise in modulating inflammation in experimental models. However, their safety and efficacy in neonates with sepsis require further investigation. Additionally, recombinant ACE2 therapy, which counteracts the pro-inflammatory effects of angiotensin II, represents a potential avenue for mitigating sepsis-induced inflammation and organ dysfunction [38].

Prophylactic measures, including maternal screening for ACE polymorphisms and the use of probiotics to modulate neonatal gut microbiota, may also play a role in reducing sepsis risk. These strategies, combined with advancements in neonatal care and infection control, could improve outcomes for neonates at genetic risk of sepsis [39].

Future research should focus on large-scale, multi-center studies to validate the association between ACE polymorphism and neonatal sepsis across diverse populations. Additionally, exploring the interaction between ACE polymorphism and environmental factors, such as maternal infections and perinatal stress, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of sepsis risk [40].

The integration of genetic, immunological, and clinical data holds promise for advancing personalized medicine in neonatal sepsis. Identifying genetic biomarkers, such as ACE polymorphisms, could enable risk stratification and tailored interventions, ultimately improving outcomes for affected neonates [41].

In conclusion, ACE polymorphism represents a critical genetic factor influencing the pathophysiology of neonatal sepsis. Its role in modulating inflammation, immune responses, and vascular function underscores its significance in this complex condition. Advancing our understanding of ACE polymorphisms and their clinical implications will be essential for developing innovative strategies to prevent and treat neonatal sepsis [42].

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