

Antenatal Hydronephrosis and its Management

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Introduction

Antenatal hydronephrosis (ANH) is the most frequently detected abnormality on routine prenatal ultrasonography, with an incidence ranging from 1% to 5% of all pregnancies depending on diagnostic thresholds and screening practices. [1,2] The widespread adoption of high-resolution obstetric ultrasound has shifted the clinical paradigm from late postnatal presentation of obstructive uropathy to early prenatal detection, surveillance, and risk stratification. [3] For pediatric surgeons and urologists, ANH represents a heterogeneous clinical entity encompassing transient physiological dilatation, vesicoureteral reflux (VUR), developmental anomalies like multicystic dysplastic kidneys (MCDK) or duplex kidneys and significant obstructive uropathies such as ureteropelvic junction (UPJ) obstruction, vesicoureteral junction obstruction (VUJO) and posterior urethral valves (PUV). [3,4] Although majority of cases resolve spontaneously, a subset is associated with progressive renal damage, underscoring the importance of judicious evaluation and timely intervention. [5].

Epidemiology

Population-based studies report antenatal hydronephrosis in approximately 1–5% of fetuses undergoing routine mid-trimester ultrasound evaluation. [1,6] Male predominance is consistently observed, particularly in moderate to severe hydronephrosis, reflecting the higher incidence of UPJ obstruction and PUV in male infants. [7] Bilateral hydronephrosis is present in 20–40% of cases and is associated with a greater likelihood of clinically significant pathology and impaired renal outcomes. [8] Despite its prevalence, only 10–30% of infants with antenatally detected hydronephrosis ultimately require surgical intervention, highlighting the risk of overtreatment if management is not appropriately stratified [2,9].

Embryology and Developmental Basis

Renal development begins at approximately the fifth week of gestation with the interaction between the ureteric bud and the metanephric mesenchyme. The ureteric bud undergoes multiple

divisions and ultimately forms the entire collecting system by 20 weeks gestation after about 15 divisions, while the metanephric mesenchyme starts differentiating into nephrons from the seventh week of gestation by ureteric bud-mesenchymal interactions. [10] About one-third of nephrons are formed by the time complete collecting system is formed, and the process continues at rapid pace and is complete by 36 weeks of gestation. Mesonephric duct fuses with the urogenital sinus (future bladder) and part of it gets incorporated into posterior wall of bladder. Urine formation begins between the 5th and 9th weeks of gestation and keeps on increasing throughout gestation, and is the main contributor towards amniotic fluid volume after the first trimester of pregnancy.

Disruptions in ureteric bud branching, canalization, or integration with the bladder may result in congenital anomalies of the kidney and urinary tract (CAKUT), many of which present as antenatal hydronephrosis. [11] Obstruction occurring during active nephrogenesis, which continues until 34–36 weeks' gestation, may impair nephron formation and lead to irreversible renal dysplasia. In contrast, obstruction occurring later in gestation primarily affects renal growth and functional maturation. [12] Lower urinary tract obstruction affects both kidneys and can result in decreased urine output from fetal kidneys and oligohydramnios.

Definitions and Classification Systems

Anteroposterior Renal Pelvic Diameter (APD)

Measurement of the anteroposterior diameter (APD) of the renal pelvis in the transverse plane remains the most widely used quantitative method for defining antenatal hydronephrosis. [2] Gestational age-specific thresholds are essential, as physiologic pelvic dilatation increases with advancing gestation (Table 1). Persistence or progression of hydronephrosis into the third trimester, particularly with APD >15 mm, is strongly predictive of postnatal pathology and need for surgical intervention. [1,13]

Table 1. Definition of ANH by APD³

Degree of ANH	Second Trimester	Third Trimester
Mild	4 to <7 mm	7 to <9 mm
Moderate	7 to ≤10 mm	9 to ≤15 mm
Severe	>10mm	>15mm

Society for Fetal Urology (SFU) Grading System

The SFU grading system classifies hydronephrosis from Grade 0 to Grade 4 based on the degree of pelvic and calyceal dilatation and renal parenchymal thinning (Table 2). [14] Although widely used postnatally, its antenatal utility is limited by interobserver variability and lack of assessment of ureteral and bladder abnormalities. [15]

Table 2. SFU Grading system of Hydronephrosis ^[14]

SFU Grade	Renal Pelvis	Calyces	Renal Parenchyma	Key surgical implication
Grade 0	No dilatation	None	Normal thickness and echogenicity	Normal kidney
Grade 1	Mild dilatation of renal pelvis only	No calyceal dilatation	Normal	Usually transient, observation
Grade 2	Moderate pelvic dilatation	Few calyces visualized, not dilated	Normal	Low risk, follow up imaging
Grade 3	Marked pelvic dilatation	Uniform dilatation of all calyces	Parenchyma preserved	Intermediate risk; functional assessment needed
Grade 4	Severe pelvic dilatation	Ballooned calyces	Parenchymal thinning ± increased echogenicity	High risk; likely obstruction, surgical evaluation

Urinary Tract Dilation (UTD) Classification System

To address limitations of prior systems, a multidisciplinary consensus group developed the Urinary Tract Dilation (UTD) classification system, which integrates APD, calyceal dilatation, renal parenchymal appearance, ureteral dilatation, bladder abnormalities, and amniotic fluid volume. [3] This system provides standardized prenatal (UTD A1–A3) and postnatal (UTD P1–P3) risk stratification and is increasingly adopted in clinical practice (Figure 1 and 2).

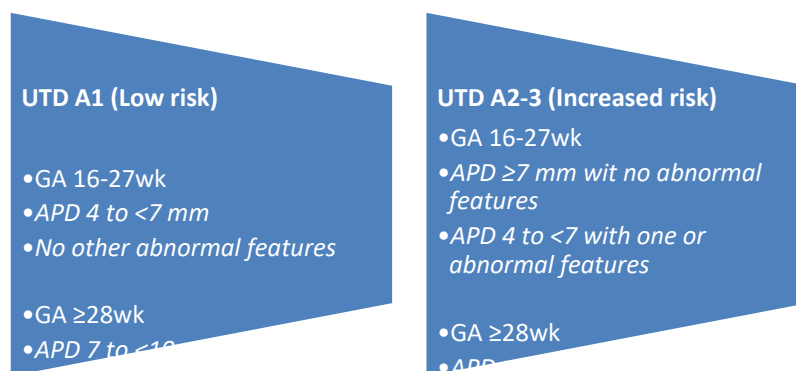


Figure 1. Antenatal UTD Risk Stratification: UTD A1 (low risk) and UTD A2-3 (increased risk)

Note: Abnormal features include *Peripheral calyceal dilation, parenchymal thinning, abnormal parenchymal appearance, abnormal ureters or bladder and unexplained oligohydramnios*

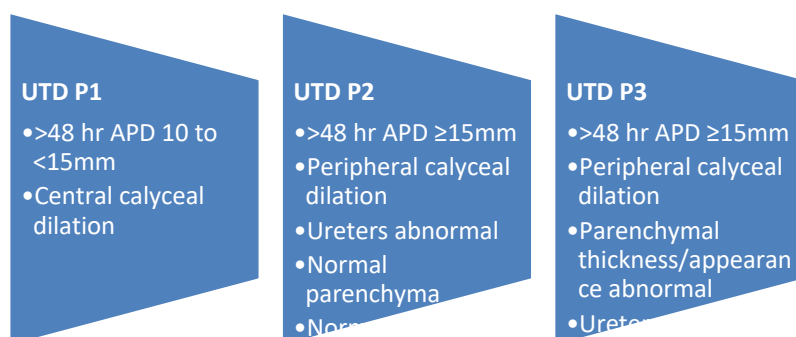


Figure 2. Postnatal UTD Risk Stratification: UTD P1 (low risk), UTD P2 (intermediate risk), and UTD P3 (high risk)

Etiology and Differential Diagnosis

UPJ obstruction is the most common cause of clinically significant antenatal hydronephrosis, accounting for up to 50% of cases requiring intervention. [16] It is typically unilateral and characterized by renal pelvic and calyceal dilatation without ureteral involvement. Vesicoureteral reflux accounts for approximately 10–20% of antenatal hydronephrosis cases, particularly those with mild to moderate dilatation. [17] Posterior urethral valves represent the most severe etiology, characterized by bilateral hydronephrosis, hydroureter, bladder wall thickening, and often oligohydramnios, with a high risk of chronic kidney disease. [18] Other less common causes include MCDK, duplex anomalies, ureterocele, Prune belly syndrome and polycystic kidney disease (Table 3).

Table 3. Etiology of Antenatal Hydronephrosis (ANH) ^[19]

S. No.	Etiology	Incidence (%)
1.	Transient/Physiologic	50-70
2.	Ureteropelvic junction obstruction	10-30
3.	Vesicoureteral reflux	10-40
4.	Ureterovesical junction obstruction/megaureter	5-15
5.	Multicystic dysplastic kidney	2-5
6.	Posterior urethral valves	1-5
7.	Ureterocele, ectopic ureter, duplex system, urethral atresia, Prune belly syndrome, polycystic kidney diseases, cysts	Uncommon

Prenatal Diagnosis

Prenatal ultrasound is the primary diagnostic modality for antenatal hydronephrosis. Comprehensive evaluation includes APD measurement, assessment of calyceal involvement, renal parenchymal thickness and echogenicity, ureteral dilatation, bladder morphology, and amniotic

fluid volume. [6] Serial ultrasound examinations (4-6 weekly) are essential, as progressive dilatation is a stronger predictor of obstruction than a single measurement. [1] Fetuses with suspicion of lower urinary tract obstruction or significant postnatal pathology like bilateral hydroureteronephrosis, distended bladder, progressive calyceal dilatation, parenchymal thinning, increased cortical echogenicity and oligohydramnios) are candidate for more frequent sonographic evaluation. [19-22] Fetal MRI may be useful in selected complex cases but is not routinely indicated. [23]

Antenatal Management and Counseling

Antenatal management is primarily observational, with intervention reserved only for cases of severe lower urinary tract obstruction threatening fetal viability. [24] The main objectives are accurate diagnosis, risk stratification, and parental counseling. Families should be informed that most cases resolve spontaneously, while moderate to severe hydronephrosis requires structured postnatal evaluation. [5] The general recommendations of prenatal monitoring schedule are as follows (Figure 3): (a) Fetuses with low risk of postnatal pathology (UTD A1) diagnosed before 32 weeks, should undergo ultrasound at or beyond 32 weeks to look for the progress. In cases of documented resolution with normal renal parenchyma, ureters and bladder, no further prenatal or postnatal follow up is warranted. In cases with persistent UTD A1 or A2-3, postnatal evaluation is recommended. (b) Cases that fall in high risk category (UTD A2-3) at the time of initial prenatal diagnosis, should undergo repeat US after 4-6 weeks and subsequent interval assessments as decided by the clinician. The risk of aneuploidy is minute in isolated ANH, however, when associated with any major structural anomaly (cardiac, neurological, skeletal or gastrointestinal) or one or more additional soft signs (absent nasal bone, increased nuchal translucency, shortened femur/humerus, echogenic bowel, choroid plexus cyst, ventriculomegaly, intracardiac echogenic focus), the risk increases substantially and further evaluation/counseling and decision of karyotyping is taken at specialized centres. [25,26]

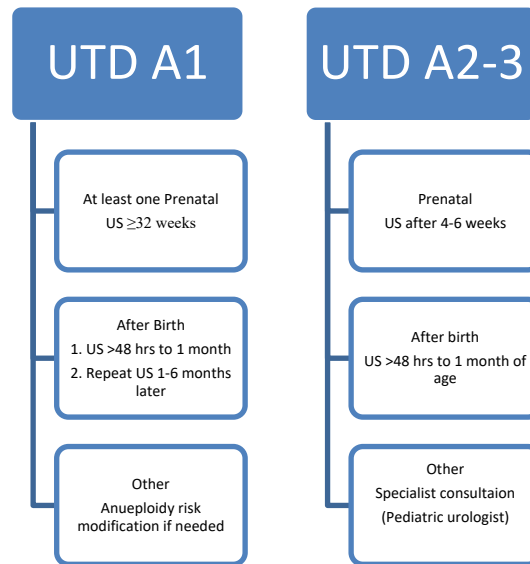


Figure 3. Management schema based on UTD classification system's risk stratification of UTD A1 and UTD A2-3 ^[3]

Prenatal Intervention for Lower Urinary Tract Obstruction

Fetal lower urinary tract obstruction (LUTO) is characterized by bilateral hydroureteronephrosis with dilated/ thick-walled bladder with dilated posterior urethra (key-hole sign). The underlying etiology is posterior urethral valve (PUV) in most of the cases, however, the alternate diagnosis like anterior urethral valve (AUV), Prune belly syndrome, prolapsed ureterocele or urethral atresia are also seen. [24,27] The in-utero and post-natal course is quite variable with severely affected ones presenting with severe oligohydramnios or anhydramnios, renal dysplasia or even pulmonary hypoplasia. [28] The sonographic indicators of possible end stage obstructive uropathy are small hyperechoic kidneys with subcortical cysts.[29] It is important to distinguish severe form that might require intervention from milder disease with minimal clinical sequelae [30]. Besides assessment of fetal anatomical abnormalities and amniotic fluid volume, genetic evaluation in LUTO is paramount as 10% cases are associated with trisomies 13, 18 or 21. [26] Ever since the first evidence of improved survival from VAS over conservative management in a randomized controlled (Percutaneous Vesicoamniotic Shunting for fetal Lower Urinary Tract Obstruction- PLUTO) trial, antenatal intervention (vesicoamniotic shunting-VAS or cystoscopic valve ablation using flexible fetoscope) is being used selectively in LUTO [31-33]. Fetal urinary biochemical

analysis has prognostic significance in such patients and can help select subjects for intervention (Table 4). [34] A more comprehensive grading system and need for fetal intervention was proposed by Ruano et al in 2015 (Table 5). [35] Potential complications of fetal intervention are intrauterine death, termination of pregnancy, chorioamnionitis, blocked shunt, premature rupture of membranes, shunt migration, bowel perforation or herniation. [31,32]

Table 4. Favourable prognostic criteria using fetal urine ^[34]

Sodium (Na)	Less than 100 mEq per liter
Chloride (Cl)	Less than 90 mEq per liter
Osmolarity (Osm)	Less than 210 mEq per liter
Calcium (Ca)	Less than 2 mmol per liter
Beta-2 microglobulin	Less than 2 mg per liter

Table 5. Staging system proposed by Ruano et al ^[35]

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Amniotic fluid	Normal	Oligohydramnios or Anhydramnios	Oligohydramnios, but usually Anhydramnios	Anhydramnios
Echogenicity of fetal kidneys	Normal	Echogenic	Echogenic	Echogenic
Renal cortical cysts	Absent	Absent	Can be present	Present
Renal dysplasia	Absent	Absent	Can be present	Present
Fetal urinary biochemistry	Favourable	Favourable within three consecutive evaluations	Not favorable after three consecutive evaluations	Unfavorable, poor bladder re-filling after vesicocentesis
Fetal intervention	Not indicated	Indicated to prevent	May be indicated to prevent	Not indicated amino infusion only

		pulmonary hypoplasia and severe renal impairment (VAS or cystoscopy)	pulmonary hypoplasia but not postnatal renal impairment (VAS with amino-infusion); further studies are necessary	
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Current evidence suggests fetal intervention in the form of VAS in selected cases of LUTO offers perinatal survival benefit. However, parental counseling regarding long term outcome like renal functional impairment or mortality is very vital. [33]

Postnatal Management

Postnatal renal ultrasound should be performed after 48–72 hours of life to avoid underestimation of hydronephrosis due to neonatal dehydration. [13] Early scans are likely to miss abnormalities of kidney and urinary tract due to low urine flow rate secondary to physiological dehydration and low glomerular filtration rate (GFR). [36] However in suspected cases of infravesical obstruction like PUV, early USG followed by voiding cystourethrogram (VCUG) is a norm to expedite evaluation and initiate timely management. Two normal postnatal ultrasounds invariably rule out significant renal pathology. [37] The scheme of management is guided by the risk stratification proposed by UTD classification system (Fig 3). [3]

1. Low risk hydronephrosis (UTD P1)

- No routine antibiotic prophylaxis in most of the cases
- Repeat renal ultrasound at 4-6 weeks of age
- Continued surveillance at 3–6-month intervals until resolution or stability is confirmed
- VCUG is not routinely indicated unless there are recurrent UTIs, ureteral dilatation or worsening hydronephrosis

2. Intermediate risk hydronephrosis (UTD P2)

- Initiate antibiotic prophylaxis in selected infants, especially in cases of ureteric dilatation or bilateral disease
- Perform repeat ultrasound at 4-6 weeks
- VCUG is recommended when ureteral dilatation, bladder abnormalities, or bilateral hydronephrosis are present to rule out VUR or posterior urethral valves (PUV)
- Diuretic renography (MAG3 or EC or DTPA scan) is performed at 6-12 weeks of age if hydronephrosis persists, to assess drainage pattern and differential renal function (DRF)

3. *High risk hydronephrosis (UTD P3)*

- Early postnatal ultrasound and repeat imaging in 1-2 weeks
- Prophylactic antibiotics are recommended due to increased risk of UTI
- VCUG to exclude VUR and PUV
- Early diuretic renography to evaluate drainage and DRF
- To decide early surgical intervention (if indicated)

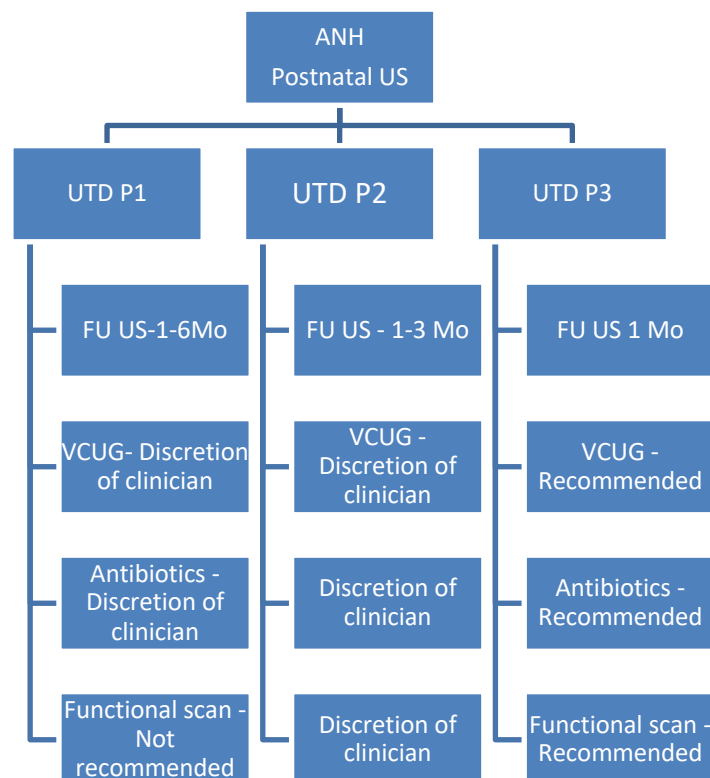


Figure 3. Postnatal management schema based on Urinary Tract Dilation (UTD) classification ^[3]

Role of Voiding Cystourethrography

VCUG is the gold standard for diagnosing VUR. Routine VCUG for all cases of ANH is no longer recommended; instead, it is reserved for infants with moderate to severe hydronephrosis, ureteral dilatation, abnormal bladder findings or recurrent febrile UTIs. Selective use of VCUG reduces unnecessary invasive testing without compromising detection of clinically significant reflux.

Posterior urethral valves should be strongly suspected in male infants with bilateral hydronephrosis, dilated posterior urethra, thick-walled bladder, or oligohydramnios antenatally. Early VCUG in these patients allows timely confirmation of diagnosis, valve ablation and prevention of progressive renal damage.

Diuretic Renography and Functional Assessment

Diuretic renography using technetium-99m mercaptoacetyltriglycine (MAG3) or Ethylene Dicycstine (EC) or diethylenetriamine pentaacetic acid (DTPA) is the cornerstone for evaluating drainage and differential renal function. It is typically performed after 6-12 weeks of age, when renal maturation allows reliable functional assessment. Indications include:

- Persistent moderate or severe hydronephrosis
- Increasing APD on serial ultrasounds
- Suspected PUJO or VUJO
- Declining renal parenchymal thickness

A DRF <40% in the affected kidney or a progressive decline on serial studies suggests significant obstruction warranting surgical correction.

Antibiotic Prophylaxis- The role of continuous antibiotic prophylaxis (CAP) has evolved, and current evidence suggests selective use rather than routine prophylaxis for all ANH cases. [8] CAP is generally recommended in:

- High grade hydronephrosis
- Suspected VUR

- Bilateral disease or solitary kidney

Indications for Surgical Intervention

Approximately only 20-30% infants with ANH require surgery. The most common indication is PUJO followed by VUR, VUJO and ureterocele. Surgical decisions are based on a combination of imaging and functional criteria rather than APD alone.

Outcomes and Prognosis

With contemporary risk-based management, the prognosis for most children with antenatal hydronephrosis is excellent. [9] However, infants with severe bilateral disease, posterior urethral valves, or dysplastic kidneys require long-term follow-up due to the risk of chronic kidney disease, hypertension, and bladder dysfunction. [38,39]

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