



Review Article

Family history of venous thromboembolism in the paediatric population: The need for a standardized definition



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ABSTRACT

Positive family history is known to be an independent risk factor for venous thromboembolic (VTE) that may or may not reflect an underlying hereditary disorder. However, there is no clear standardized definition of what constitutes a positive family history for VTE in children. We aimed to assess the current published definitions of positive family history as a risk factor for VTE in children and ascertain if any consensus exists.

Methods: We conducted a literature review through two major databases PUBMED and EMBASE (1969–June 2018). Three different search statements were used for each database to maximize the number of relevant results, giving rise to 1050 non-duplicated papers.

Results: Of the 1050 papers, 32 articles demonstrated 18 separate definitions on what constitutes a positive family history in paediatric studies. Variations in definitions were related to the closeness of kinship (first or second-degree relatives), whether thrombosis was provoked or unprovoked, the age of presentation of thrombosis in the kinship, and clinical vs. laboratory definition of positive family history. Of the definitions, 1st degree relative/s developing VTE at any age whether provoked or unprovoked was most commonly described. **Conclusion:** According to this literature review, the definition of a positive family history in paediatric populations is non-standardized amongst current published papers. To enable accurate comparisons across studies and improve clinical risk assessment, we therefore propose the need for a standardized definition of what constitutes a positive family history.

1. Introduction

Family history is a widely used variable when assessing thrombosis risks in both adults and children, and extensively studied in the adult population. The consensus is that a positive family history is an independent risk factor for development of venous thromboembolism (VTE) regardless of additional identified non-genetic or genetic factors [1–3].

The incidence of paediatric thrombosis is far fewer than adult thrombosis, with reported incidence ratios of VTE ranging from 0.7 to 4.9 per 100,000 person-years [4–6]. Naturally with such relative low incidence, there is correspondingly scarce data and research in comparison to adult studies. To date, much of current paediatric management of VTE has been extrapolated from adult studies [7,8].

However, research indicates that paediatric VTE is significantly different from adult VTE in its epidemiology, frequency and natural history [9,10]. A large meta-analysis found statistically significant odds ratios between all currently identified inherited thrombophilic defects (Protein C deficiency, Protein S deficiency, Antithrombin deficiency, Factor V G1691A, Factor II G20210A, Lipoprotein, > 2 combined genetic traits) and first onset of VTE in paediatric patients [11].

So far, research has generally been focused on assessing the benefits of screening children with a positive family history of VTE for inherited thrombophilia [11,12]. The results have mostly demonstrated that family history is a poor predictor of inherited thrombophilic genetic defects [3,5,13–16]. In fact, an adult study shows the 5 major identified inherited thrombophilic defects (Protein C deficiency, Protein S deficiency, Antithrombin deficiency, Factor V Leiden mutation,

Abbreviations: VTE, venous thromboembolism; ATE, arterial thromboembolism

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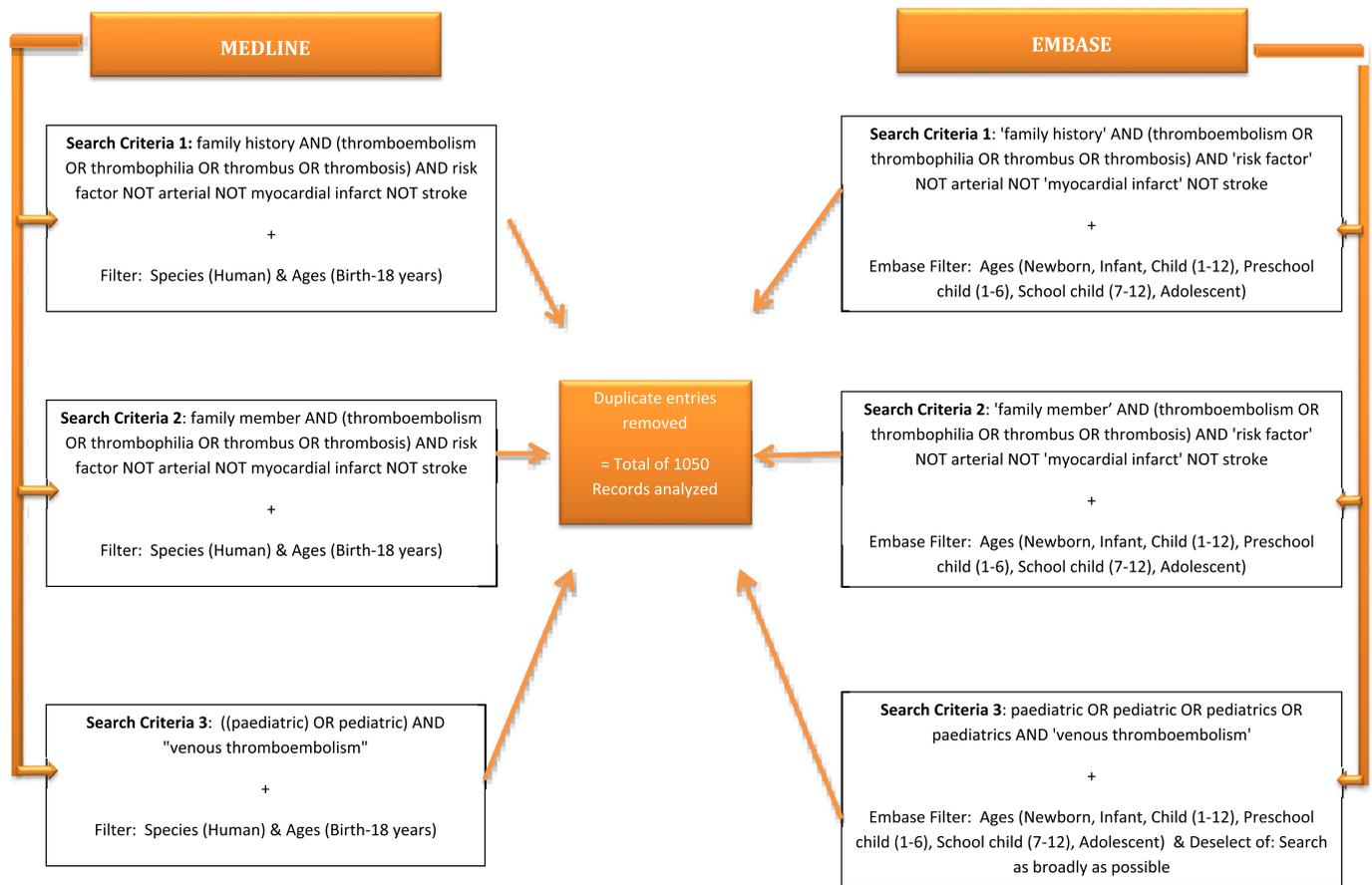


Fig. 1. Search statements used for MEDLINE and EMBASE.

Table 1
Definitions of “family history” reported in paediatric VTE literature.

Definitions	References using definition
1st degree relative	[17,18,19,20,21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28]
1st and/or 2nd degree relatives with VTE	[29,30,31,13]
1st and/or 2nd degree relatives with VTE, before age 55	[12]
1st degree relative with VTE/stroke < 40 years	[32]
1st degree relative with VTE, before age 45	[33]
1st degree relatives with VTE and/or arterial TE, before age 50 years	[10]
1st degree relative with VTE, before age 55	[34]
1st degree relative with VTE or bleeding diathesis	[35]
1st degree relatives with thrombosis or cerebrovascular disease before age 50	[36]
1st and/or 2nd degree relatives with thrombosis, before age 45	[37]
1st and/or 2nd degree relative with DVT, pulmonary embolism, myocardial infarct or stroke < 40 years, recurrent abortions (> 3) and/or laboratory diagnosis of inherited thrombophilia	[38]
1st and/or 2nd degree relatives with history of Perthes disease, blood clots, stroke, myocardial infarction, thrombosis of the lower limbs, and pulmonary embolism, before age 55	[39]
Myocardial infarct or Cerebral Vascular Attack (CVA) before age 55	[40]
1st degree relatives with antithrombin-, protein C-, or protein S-deficiency carriers, or in cases of combined inherited thrombophilia	[41]
Confirmed family history of higher risk prothrombotic defects, such as Antithrombin (AT), protein C or protein S deficiency	[42]
Family history of young thrombosis, habitual abortion, foetal/neonatal hydrocephalus and consanguineous marriages	[43]
1st and/or 2nd degree relatives with VTE, before age 50	[44]
Family history of VTE, stroke, or myocardial infarction in a first- or second-degree relative < 50 years old	[45]

Prothrombin 20210A mutation) contribute to only ~30% of family history [1]. This is significant as it implies that there are unmeasurable familial factors or unknown genetic factors that have been accounted for by a positive family history.

To our knowledge, there is no current consensus of what constitutes a positive family history of VTE in regards to the paediatric population. As a variable with such potential to risk stratify and affect management, it is vital to have a uniform definition of what constitutes a positive family history. Our objective is to assess current published definitions of

positive family history as a risk factor for VTE in the paediatric population and ascertain if any consensus exists.

2. Methods

We conducted a literature review on June 30, 2018 through two major databases MEDLINE and EMBASE. Three different search statements were constructed in order to obtain high yield and specific results (Fig. 1). The search results were then uploaded to the program

EndNote to manage the database and delete duplicate results.

Inclusion criteria: English language literature; paediatric cohort 0–18 years; family history as a risk factor for VTE.

Exclusion criteria: family history not identified as a risk factor for VTE; non-human; grouped data sets with mixed adult and paediatric populations; articles that did not differentiate between ATE and VTE. Our reasoning behind this is due to arterial and venous thrombus originating from two different pathologies.

Given this review aimed to assess current published definitions of positive family history as a risk factor for paediatric VTE, the statistical significance of the article was not a factor in our consideration for inclusion.

1050 non-duplicated articles were analyzed from the search terms. Only 32 articles gave definition of a positive family history in regards to being a risk factor for paediatric thrombosis (Table 1). The remaining articles either did not meet the inclusion criteria or did not give a formal definition of what constitutes a positive family history.

Our review of the literature yielded 18 definitions of a positive family history. Variations in definitions were related to:

- 1) Closeness of kinship (e.g.: first or second degree relatives)
- 2) The age of presentation of thrombosis in the kinship
- 3) The type of thrombosis (e.g.: arterial vs. venous)
- 4) Clinical diagnosis versus laboratory evidence of inherited thrombophilia (e.g.: DVT/PE vs. AT deficiency)

The most common definition of a positive family history was a 1st degree relative developing VTE at any age (12/32 or 37.5%) followed by 1st and/or 2nd degree relative with VTE (4/32 or 12.5%). Table 1 lists the definitions in descending order of frequency.

3. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate whether a consensus exists in published literature for what defines a positive family history as a risk factor for VTE in the paediatric population. Our finding of 18 separate definitions confirmed that there is currently no consensus in published literature on the definition of a positive family history.

This supports a previous observation that family history was not a well-defined variable in the context of assessing children for risk of thrombophilia [46].

In adult clinical practice, family history has long been used to risk stratify VTE, particularly as a tool to distinguish between sporadic and inherited thrombophilia, to validate extensive testing for prothrombotic genetic traits for individuals or families [15].

Given the lack of similar paediatric data that shows significant correlation between inherited thrombophilia and VTE development [14], the current recommendation to avoid over screening and causing undue distress to the child and family members is to perform thrombophilia testing on an individual basis after counseling the family of the potential risk benefits of testing [47]. Furthermore, the 7th American College of Chest Physicians (ACCP) Conference on Antithrombotic and thrombolytic therapy concluded that due to the unclarified relationship between known genetic factors and occurrence of paediatric VTE, screening children with VTE for prothrombotic genetic risk factors was of unproven benefit, regardless of any acquired risk factors [7]. Furthermore, testing for thrombophilia is complicated by the concept of developmental haemostasis, a term coined by Dr. Andrew, describing the evolving age-dependent process of haemostasis, which continues throughout life. Most marked changes happen during childhood, and are evident by the distinct physiological concentration differences of prothrombotic proteins [48].

Family history still plays an important role in everyday practice, even though as a stand-alone tool, it is a weak instrument to determine

who to screen for thrombophilia. Despite Rudd et al. [13] showing a weak association between positive family history of venous thrombosis and certain well known genetic traits; it should be noted that multiple adult studies [1,2,49,50] have found family history to be an independent risk factor regardless of known genetic or environmental risk factors.

However, family history becomes unhelpful given there is no consensus on its definition. As observed in our findings, the various definitions encompassed both clinical and laboratory definitions of a positive family history. The definitions based on laboratory findings are often unhelpful as the risk of having a relative with a VTE is quite different from the risk of having an asymptomatic relative with a known inherited thrombophilic trait.

We believe family history can be utilized more effectively as an independent risk factor if it is further subdivided. Several recent adult studies have sought to differentiate the strength of this risk factor by examining factors such as number of relatives affected; provoked vs. unprovoked VTE; age of first onset of VTE in relatives [2,50]. In order to use family history as a reliable risk factor in the paediatric population, there is an urgent need for similar studies examining paediatric data.

In our literature review, we have minimized any language bias by including articles in foreign languages if they have an English abstract that satisfies the inclusion criteria. However if the information from the abstract was insufficient to determine eligibility, it was marked as unable to be analyzed. We were unable to analyse 9 out of the 1050 articles. Assuming these 9 articles to be eligible for inclusion, a 0.8% exclusion error is present. Our strict inclusion criteria excludes several studies exploring gender, familial and age variants with familial transmission of VTE [1,2,51]; however, their findings would not have altered our results as their definitions of a positive family history were included in our findings. Additionally we included poster abstracts in our search to ensure relevant grey literature was maximised.

4. Conclusion

Our review has found no consensus exists in published literature on what defines family history in paediatric VTE. The most commonly used definition was that of first degree relative with VTE, but did not include information such as provoked or unprovoked nor age of VTE, nor number of affected relatives. There is an urgent need for more quantitative research in order to come to a consensus of positive family history, given its significance as an independent risk factor for paediatric VTE. In the interim, all papers reporting family history as a risk factor for paediatric VTE, should include the specific definition of family history that was applied to their patient population, so rates and significance of family history can be appropriately compared throughout the available literature.

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