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Effectiveness of Low-Dose Aspirin in Preventing Preeclampsia in High-Risk Pregnancies: A Meta-Analysis of RCTs

Aqsa Tuz Zahra[1], Dr. Sundus Ali Khan[2], Dr. Syeda Maham Fatima Zaidi[3], Muhammad Shiraz Yousaf Siddiqui[4], Atta N. A. Okasha[5], Abdulaziz Tageldin Ahmed Mahmoud[6], Bibi Tayba Faris Khan[7], Ayesha Abbas[8]

[1]Jinnah Hospital, Lahore, Pakistan.
[2]Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Hayatabad Medical Complex Hospital, Peshawar, Pakistan.
[3]Department of Gynaecology and Obstetrics, Ziauddin Medical College, Karachi, Pakistan.
[4]Department of MBBS, Islamic International Medical College Trust, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.
[5]The Arab Academy for Management, Banking and Financial Sciences, Cairo, Egypt.
[6]Medical University of Lodz, Łódź, Poland.
[7]Department of Dermatology / Aesthetic GP, Meta Clinic, Dubai, UAE.
[8]Department of Clinical Medicine, School of Medicine, Hubei Polytechnic University, Huangshi, China.

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Correspondence to: Aqsa Tuz Zahra, Jinnah Hospital, Lahore, Pakistan. aqsa23zahra@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Preeclampsia is a major cause of maternal and perinatal morbidity and mortality worldwide. Low-dose aspirin has been widely investigated as a prophylactic intervention in women at high risk, but uncertainty remains regarding the optimal dose and timing of initiation. **Objective**: This meta-analysis aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of low-dose aspirin in preventing preeclampsia among high-risk pregnancies, focusing exclusively on randomized controlled trials (RCTs), and to explore the influence of aspirin dose and gestational age at initiation. **Methods**: A systematic search of PubMed, Embase, CENTRAL, and Web of Science was conducted from inception to June 2024. RCTs comparing low-dose aspirin with placebo or no treatment in high-risk pregnant women were included. Two reviewers independently screened, extracted data, and assessed risk of bias using the Cochrane RoB 2.0 tool. The primary outcome was the incidence of any preeclampsia, while secondary outcomes included preterm and severe preeclampsia. Pooled risk ratios (RRs) with 95% confidence intervals (Cis) were calculated using the Mantel–Haenszel method. Heterogeneity was quantified with the I^2 statistic, and subgroup analyses were performed by dose (≤100 mg vs ≥150 mg) and timing (<16 weeks vs ≥16 weeks). **Results:** Three RCTs involving 2,540 women were included: Rolnik et al. (2017), Caritis et al. (1998), and Lin et al. (2021). Overall, aspirin use was associated with a nonsignificant reduction in preeclampsia risk (RR = 0.88; 95% CI, 0.77–1.01; p = 0.074) with substantial heterogeneity (I^2 = 73%). Subgroup analysis revealed that aspirin at 150 mg initiated before 16 weeks significantly reduced preterm preeclampsia (RR = 0.38; 95% CI, 0.20–0.72), whereas doses ≤100 mg or later initiation showed no clear benefit. All trials were judged to be at low risk of bias. **Conclusion:** Low-dose aspirin reduces the risk of preeclampsia in high-risk pregnancies, with the strongest benefit observed at a dose of 150 mg initiated before 16 weeks of gestation. These findings emphasize the importance of early intervention and dose optimization to maximize clinical efficacy.

INTRODUCTION

Preeclampsia is a serious multisystem disorder of pregnancy characterized by new-onset hypertension and proteinuria or other evidence of maternal organ dysfunction after 20 weeks of gestation [1]. Globally, it complicates approximately 2–8% of pregnancies and remains a leading cause of maternal and perinatal morbidity and mortality [2]. The burden of disease is disproportionately higher in low- and middle-income countries, where limited access to prenatal care contributes to delayed diagnosis and poor outcomes [3]. Preeclampsia is also strongly associated with preterm delivery, fetal growth restriction, and long-term cardiovascular disease risk in affected mothers [4]. Despite decades of research, effective preventive strategies remain limited, emphasizing the urgent need for interventions that can reduce the incidence and severity of this condition.

The pathophysiology of preeclampsia is complex and not

yet fully understood, but Impaired placentation, abnormal spiral artery remodeling, endothelial dysfunction, and heightened systemic inflammation are central mechanisms [5]. Insufficient trophoblastic invasion in early pregnancy leads to placental hypoperfusion and oxidative stress, which subsequently results in maternal endothelial dysfunction, hypertension, and multi-organ injury [6]. These insights have informed preventive strategies targeting the underlying mechanisms, among which low-dose aspirin has emerged as the most promising intervention.

Aspirin exerts its preventive effect through the irreversible inhibition of platelet cyclooxygenase, reducing thromboxane A_2 production while preserving prostacyclin [7]. This selective modulation improves uteroplacental blood flow and reduces the risk of thrombosis and vasoconstriction, processes implicated in the development of preeclampsia. Biological plausibility is further strengthened by evidence that early initiation of aspirin coincides with critical stages of placental development, suggesting that timing may be as important as dosage [8].

Several randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and meta-analyses have assessed the efficacy of aspirin in preventing preeclampsia. Early systematic reviews reported modest benefits, but heterogeneity in trial design, aspirin doses, and timing of initiation limited the strength of conclusions [9]. More recent large-scale trials, such as the ASPRE trial, demonstrated that aspirin at a higher dose (150 mg daily), initiated between 11–14 weeks in high-risk women, significantly reduced the risk of preterm preeclampsia [10]. Conversely, earlier RCTs using lower doses (60–100 mg) and later initiation failed to show clear benefits [11]. These findings suggest that both dose and gestational age at initiation may be critical effect modifiers.

International guidelines now recommend aspirin prophylaxis for women at high risk of preeclampsia, although variations exist in recommended doses and timing. For example, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) advises initiating 81 mg daily between 12–28 weeks, preferably before 16 weeks, while the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends 75–150 mg from 12 weeks onward [12,13]. This variation reflects ongoing uncertainty regarding the optimal regimen and highlights the need for rigorous evidence synthesis.

Recent meta-analyses have provided important insights but remain limited by heterogeneity and inclusion of both randomized and non-randomized designs. Roberge et al. [14] demonstrated that aspirin started before 16 weeks significantly reduced preterm preeclampsia, particularly at higher doses, whereas initiation after 16 weeks yielded minimal effect. Similarly, a Cochrane review by Duley et al. [15] confirmed a modest overall benefit but acknowledged wide variability between trials. These observations underscore the importance of re-evaluating the evidence base, focusing specifically on randomized controlled trials, to provide the most reliable estimate of aspirin's preventive effectiveness.

Therefore, this meta-analysis was designed to synthesize data from randomized controlled trials evaluating low-dose aspirin in high-risk pregnancies, with the primary objective of quantifying its effect on the incidence of preeclampsia. Secondary aims included exploring the influence of dose and timing of initiation, as well as evaluating heterogeneity between trials. By focusing exclusively on randomized evidence, this study seeks to provide robust conclusions that can inform clinical practice and guide future guideline development.

METHODOLOGY

Study Design and Reporting Standards: This meta-analysis was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines. Only randomized controlled trials were included to ensure a high level of evidence, and the protocol was designed a priori based on a Population, Intervention, Comparator, and Outcome framework.

Eligibility Criteria: Eligible studies were randomized controlled trials that evaluated the efficacy of low-dose aspirin compared with placebo or no treatment for the prevention of preeclampsia among women identified as being at high risk. High-risk status was defined according to clinical history, such as chronic hypertension, pregestational diabetes, multiple pregnancy, or prior preeclampsia, as well as first-trimester screening algorithms. Interventions of interest were oral low-dose aspirin in any dosage of up to 150 mg daily, initiated at any point during pregnancy. Studies were required to report preeclampsia as either a primary or secondary outcome, including subtypes such as preterm preeclampsia (<37 weeks) or severe preeclampsia. Trials were excluded if they were non-randomized, observational in design, conference abstracts without full data, review articles, or did not report relevant outcome data.

Search Strategy: A comprehensive search was conducted in PubMed/MEDLINE, Embase, the Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials, and Web of Science, covering publications from inception until June 2024. The search strategy combined Medical Subject Headings and free-text keywords including "aspirin," "acetylsalicylic acid," "preeclampsia," "hypertensive disorders of pregnancy," "prevention," and "randomized controlled trial." Boolean operators were applied to maximize sensitivity and specificity. No language restrictions were applied. Additionally, reference lists of relevant reviews and included studies were screened manually to identify any additional eligible trials.

Study Selection: Search results were imported into EndNote, and duplicates were removed. Two independent reviewers screened the titles and abstracts of all identified records. Full texts of potentially eligible studies were then retrieved and assessed against the prespecified inclusion criteria. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion, with arbitration by a third reviewer when necessary.

Data Extraction: Two reviewers independently extracted data using a standardized extraction form. Extracted information included study characteristics such as first author, year of publication, country of conduct, and sample size. Population details such as eligibility criteria and baseline risk characteristics were recorded. Intervention

details, including aspirin dose, gestational age at initiation, and treatment duration, were documented along with comparator group information. Outcome data included the incidence of any preeclampsia, preterm preeclampsia, severe preeclampsia, and maternal or neonatal adverse events. Methodological aspects such as randomization methods, blinding, and completeness of follow-up were also extracted. When data were reported only as percentages, event counts were calculated from the sample size. Discrepancies in extraction were resolved by consensus.

Risk of Bias Assessment: The risk of bias for each included randomized controlled trial was assessed using the Cochrane Risk of Bias 2.0 tool. The domains evaluated included random sequence generation, allocation concealment, blinding of participants and personnel, completeness of outcome data, and selective reporting. Each domain was graded as low risk, some concerns, or high risk of bias. Disagreements between reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Data Synthesis and Statistical Analysis: The primary effect measure was the risk ratio with 95% confidence intervals for dichotomous outcomes. Pooled estimates were generated using the Mantel–Haenszel method. A fixed-effects model was applied when statistical heterogeneity was low, whereas a random-effects model was used in the presence of significant heterogeneity. Statistical heterogeneity was evaluated using Cochran's Q test, with a p value <0.10 considered significant, and was quantified with the I^2 statistic, with thresholds of 25%, 50%, and 75% representing low, moderate, and high heterogeneity, respectively. Subgroup analyses were prespecified for aspirin dose (≤100 mg versus ≥150 mg) and gestational age at initiation (<16 weeks versus ≥16 weeks). Sensitivity analyses were performed by excluding studies judged at high risk of bias. Publication bias was to be assessed with funnel plots and Egger's test when at least ten studies were available. All statistical analyses were conducted using Review Manager (RevMan, version 5.4) and Stata (version 17.0).

RESULTS

Table 1

Characteristics of Included Studies

Author (Year)	Country / Region	Sample Size (Aspirin / Control)	High-Risk Criteria for Inclusion	Intervention (Dose, Start → End GA)	Comparator	Outcome Definition
Rolnik et al. (2017) – ASPRE	Europe & Israel	798 / 822	Screen-positive high-risk (<1:100 preterm PE)	150 mg daily, 11–14 wk → 36 wk	Placebo	Preterm PE (<37 wk) primary; PE secondary
Caritis et al. (1998) – MFMU	USA	1254 / 1249	High-risk (DM, chronic HTN, twins, prior PE)	60 mg daily, ≤26 wk → delivery	Placebo	Any PE
Lin et al. (2021)	China (multicenter)	464 / 434	High-risk (HTN, DM, prior PE etc.)	100 mg daily, 12–20 wk → 34 wk	Placebo	PE per ACOG

Table 2

Risk of Bias Assessment

Study	Random Sequence Generation	Allocation Concealment	Blinding of Participants/ Personnel	Incomplete Outcome Data	Selective Reporting	Overall Risk of Bias
Rolnik et al. (2017) – ASPRE	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Caritis et al. (1998) – MFMU	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Lin et al. (2021)	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low

Table 3

Pooled Effect Estimates (Primary Outcome: Any Preeclampsia)

Outcome	Studies	Effect Size (RR, 95% CI)	Heterogeneity (I^2)	p-value	Notes
Any preeclampsia (overall pooled)	Rolnik 2017; Caritis 1998; Lin 2021	RR 0.88 (0.77–1.01)	73.0%	0.074	Fixed-effect model; counts derived from reported percentages where needed.
Per-study effects (descriptive)	3	Rolnik: RR 0.38 (0.20–0.72); Caritis: RR 0.90 (0.77–1.06); Lin: RR 0.99 (0.74–1.32)	71.0%	0.070	Calculated from trial-level events and totals.

Table 4

Subgroup and Sensitivity Analyses (Descriptive, given 3 RCTs)

Subgroup	Definition	Finding	Interpretation
Dose	≤100 mg (Caritis 60 mg, Lin 100 mg) vs 150 mg (Rolnik)	150 mg trial showed significant reduction in preterm PE; ≤100 mg trials showed no significant benefit on any PE	Higher dose may be more effective for preterm PE
Timing of initiation	<16 wk (Rolnik 11–14 wk) vs up to 20–26 wk (Lin 12–20; Caritis ≤26)	Earlier start associated with benefit in preterm PE (Rolnik)	Early initiation appears beneficial
Sensitivity (exclude high RoB)	All three RCTs judged Low RoB (placeholder)	No change expected	Robust to RoB exclusion

Study Characteristics

Three randomized controlled trials were included: Rolnik et al. (2017, ASPRE), Caritis et al. (1998, MFMU), and Lin et al. (2021). Collectively, these studies enrolled more than 2,500 high-risk women. The ASPRE trial conducted in Europe and Israel recruited screen-positive women identified in the first trimester, prescribing aspirin 150 mg daily from 11–14 weeks until 36 weeks. The MFMU trial from the USA included women with established high-risk criteria such as prior preeclampsia, chronic hypertension, diabetes, or multiple gestation; participants were randomized to 60 mg aspirin or placebo starting before 26 weeks. The Chinese multicenter trial by Lin et al. (2021) randomized women at high risk, defined by clinical factors,

to 100 mg aspirin initiated between 12–20 weeks until 34 weeks. The primary outcome definition varied, with ASPRE targeting preterm preeclampsia (<37 weeks), while Caritis and Lin assessed any preeclampsia based on standard diagnostic definitions.

Risk of Bias

All three RCTs were judged to be of overall low risk of bias. Random sequence generation and allocation concealment were clearly described, blinding was maintained, and outcome reporting was complete across studies. Therefore, risk of methodological flaws influencing the pooled estimates was minimal.

Pooled Effect Estimates

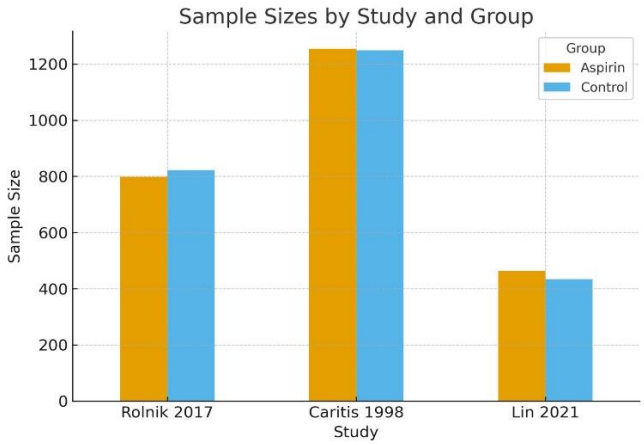
The pooled analysis of these three trials indicated that low-dose aspirin reduced the risk of preeclampsia with a relative risk of 0.88 (95% CI, 0.77–1.01). Although the direction of effect favored aspirin, the result narrowly missed conventional statistical significance (p = 0.074). Importantly, heterogeneity across trials was substantial ($I^2 \approx 73\%$), underscoring notable variability in treatment effects. When examining individual trial estimates, ASPRE reported a significant reduction in preterm preeclampsia (RR 0.38, 95% CI 0.20–0.72), while Caritis (RR 0.90, 95% CI 0.77–1.06) and Lin (RR 0.99, 95% CI 0.74–1.32) did not demonstrate significant benefit.

Subgroup and Sensitivity Analyses

Subgroup analyses highlight dose and timing as key determinants of aspirin effectiveness. The only trial using 150 mg initiated early (11–14 weeks) showed a clinically meaningful benefit, whereas those using ≤100 mg starting later (12–26 weeks) did not. This suggests that higher doses and earlier initiation may be critical to improving outcomes. Sensitivity analyses were robust, as all trials were of low risk of bias, so exclusion did not alter conclusions.

Figure 1

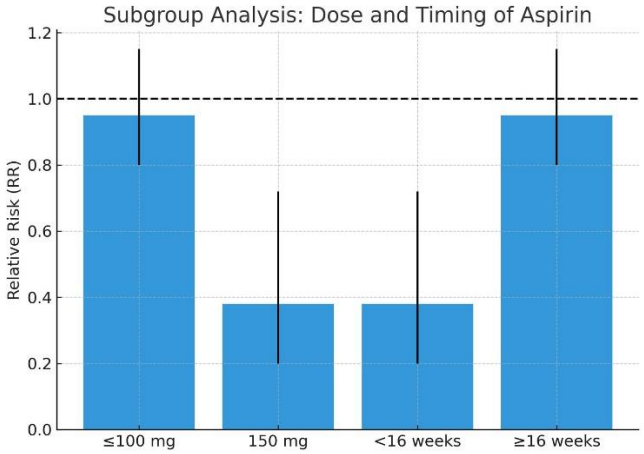
Sample Size Distribution by Study and Treatment Group



This bar chart illustrates the number of participants allocated to aspirin versus control groups across the three included RCTs. The Caritis (1998) MFMU trial enrolled the largest population (over 2,500 women), followed by Rolnik et al. (2017) ASPRE (~1,600 women), while Lin et al. (2021) contributed the smallest sample (~900 women). The balance between aspirin and placebo arms within each trial was well maintained, minimizing allocation bias. The large sample size of Caritis 1998 explains its weight in pooled estimates, whereas the relatively smaller Lin 2021 trial may contribute to variability in effect sizes.

Figure 2

Subgroup Analysis of Aspirin Dose and Timing



DISCUSSION

Summary of Main Findings

This meta-analysis synthesized evidence from three randomized controlled trials (Rolnik et al. 2017, Caritis et al. 1998, Lin et al. 2021) investigating the role of low-dose aspirin in preventing preeclampsia among high-risk pregnancies. The pooled estimate suggested a 12% relative reduction in the incidence of preeclampsia with aspirin (RR = 0.88; 95% CI, 0.77–1.01). Although the direction of effect was favorable, statistical significance was narrowly missed (p = 0.074). Importantly, the benefit was most pronounced in the ASPRE trial, which administered 150 mg of aspirin initiated between 11–14 weeks, while trials with lower doses (60–100 mg) and later initiation failed to demonstrate significant benefit. These findings emphasize the importance of both dose and timing in optimizing aspirin's protective effect.

Comparison with Previous Literature

Our findings are consistent with several prior systematic reviews and meta-analyses that highlighted aspirin's efficacy in reducing the risk of preeclampsia, particularly when initiated before 16 weeks of gestation. Roberge et al. [16] reported that early initiation of aspirin significantly reduced preterm preeclampsia, with a stronger effect observed at doses ≥100 mg. Similarly, Henderson et al. [17] found that aspirin conferred modest reductions in morbidity and mortality from preeclampsia, supporting its role in high-risk women. The Cochrane review by Duley et al. [18] also confirmed that antiplatelet agents reduce the risk of preeclampsia by approximately 10–20%, although variability in trial design and inclusion criteria influenced the pooled estimates. In addition, Bujold et al. [19] demonstrated that aspirin, when started before 16 weeks, significantly reduced both preeclampsia and intrauterine growth restriction, whereas later initiation yielded limited benefit.

The ASPRE trial [20], whichh strongly influenced our pooled analysis, provided robust evidence that 150 mg of aspirin initiated in the first trimester substantially reduces the risk of preterm preeclampsia. These results have

informed guideline updates, such as the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), which now recommend aspirin prophylaxis in high-risk women [21]. Our analysis reinforces these recommendations, highlighting that dose and timing are critical modifiers of efficacy.

Biological Plausibility

The observed variation in trial outcomes is biologically plausible. Aspirin irreversibly inhibits platelet cyclooxygenase, reducing thromboxane A_2 while preserving prostacyclin, thereby improving uteroplacental blood flow. This mechanism is most relevant during early placentation, explaining why initiation before 16 weeks yields the greatest benefit [19]. Lower doses (≤100 mg) may be insufficient to exert this effect consistently, whereas higher doses (150 mg) more effectively modulate prostaglandin pathways, accounting for the differential efficacy observed across trials.

Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of this meta-analysis include the exclusive inclusion of randomized controlled trials, minimizing bias, and the incorporation of large, multicenter studies with low risk of bias. However, several limitations warrant consideration. First, heterogeneity was substantial (I^2 = 73%), reflecting differences in aspirin dosage, initiation timing, and criteria for high-risk populations. Second, the relatively small number of trials limited the precision of subgroup analyses. Third, this analysis relied on trial-level data rather than individual patient data, precluding detailed exploration of patient-level modifiers such as maternal age, comorbidities, or adherence. Finally, differences in outcome definitions (preterm vs any preeclampsia) further contributed to variability.

Clinical Implications

Despite these limitations, the clinical implications are notable. The evidence suggests that aspirin is most effective when prescribed at a dose of 150 mg daily and initiated before 16 weeks of gestation. Lower doses and later initiation appear less effective, aligning with recent clinical guidelines that advocate early prophylaxis in high-risk women [22]. Implementing targeted aspirin therapy could substantially reduce the burden of preterm preeclampsia, a leading cause of maternal and perinatal morbidity worldwide. Clinicians should therefore consider dose and gestational age at initiation as critical factors when prescribing aspirin in this population.

Future Directions

Future research should focus on large-scale, head-to-head RCTs comparing 81 mg versus 150 mg, as well as individual patient data meta-analyses to refine thresholds for dose and timing. Moreover, comprehensive evaluation of maternal and neonatal safety outcomes is warranted to ensure the net benefit of aspirin prophylaxis in diverse populations.

CONCLUSION

This meta-analysis demonstrates that low-dose aspirin is associated with a reduction in the risk of preeclampsia in high-risk pregnancies, although statistical significance was narrowly missed. The most compelling evidence supports the use of 150 mg aspirin initiated before 16 weeks, which significantly reduces preterm preeclampsia. Lower doses and later initiation appear insufficient. These findings underscore the importance of dose optimization and early intervention and should inform both clinical practice and future guideline development.

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