

Sonographic Assessment of Placental Thickness in the Third Trimester as a Predictor of Perinatal Outcomes: A Prospective Cohort Study

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Abstract

*Placental morphology governs the intrauterine environment, influencing fetal growth, oxygenation, and nutrient transfer, making it a critical determinant of perinatal health. The use of **ultrasonographic placental thickness (PT)** as a non-invasive biomarker has gained increasing interest, particularly in identifying pregnancies at risk for adverse outcomes. This prospective cohort study evaluated placental thickness at **32 and 36 weeks of gestation** and explored its association with perinatal outcomes, aiming to determine its predictive reliability. A total of 200 antenatal women with singleton pregnancies and reliable dating were assessed. Placental thickness was measured at the central portion of the placenta using standardized sonographic techniques and was categorized into percentile-based groups. Maternal factors, fetal well-being parameters, birth weight, Apgar scores, mode of delivery, and NICU admissions were recorded. Results demonstrated a significant increase in PT between 32 and 36 weeks, confirming its gestational progression. Placental thickness below the 10th percentile was strongly associated with **intrauterine growth restriction, low birth weight (<2.5 kg)**, low Apgar scores, and higher NICU admissions, reinforcing its diagnostic value. Conversely, normal PT values showed a positive correlation with neonatal birth weight and overall outcomes, indicating **reassuring fetal well-being**. No meaningful association between maternal BMI and PT was observed. The findings suggest that third-trimester PT measurement serves as a reliable indicator of fetal condition, and incorporating this parameter into routine antenatal surveillance may allow earlier recognition of high-risk pregnancies and timely obstetric interventions. The study concludes that **sonographic placental thickness** offers a valuable, accessible, and non-invasive tool to improve perinatal outcome prediction.*

Keywords: *Placental thickness, Ultrasonography, Fetal growth restriction, Birth weight, Perinatal outcome*

Introduction

The placenta plays a pivotal role in supporting fetal development, functioning as the primary interface for **maternal–fetal exchange** of nutrients, gases, and metabolic products. Its size and morphology reflect both placental and fetal health, and abnormalities in placental structure have been linked to variations in fetal growth and perinatal outcomes. Among various sonographic parameters, **placental thickness (PT)** has emerged as a potentially valuable indicator for evaluating placental function and fetal well-being. Placental thickness measurement is simple, reproducible, and widely accessible through ultrasonography, making it an appealing marker in routine antenatal care. Several studies have demonstrated an association between abnormal PT values and adverse outcomes, including fetal growth restriction, low birth weight, and perinatal morbidity [1 before 2018]. However, the third trimester remains a particularly critical period for PT evaluation due to the rapid escalation in fetal growth demands and placental workload. Accurate assessment during this period may help clinicians identify high-risk pregnancies before complications

manifest clinically. The physiological increase in PT with advancing gestational age is well established, with thickness often correlating with fetal size and placental maturity [2 before 2020]. Nevertheless, deviations from expected percentile norms may signal potential pathology. Subnormal placental thickness has been linked to maternal vascular insufficiency, chronic hypertension, and fetal growth restriction, whereas excessively thick placentae may indicate gestational diabetes or hydrops fetalis [3 before 2017]. Despite the clinical significance, PT measurement is not yet universally adopted in routine antenatal protocols, especially in low-resource regions. The integration of PT assessment into standardized obstetric ultrasound practice could offer considerable benefits due to its non-invasive nature and predictive capability. This study aims to evaluate placental thickness at 32 and 36 weeks of gestation among pregnant women presenting to Rama Medical College & Hospital, Hapur, and to correlate its values with key perinatal outcomes. By understanding these relationships, we aim to determine whether PT measurement can serve as a reliable screening tool for early detection of at-risk pregnancies. The prospective cohort design ensures robust data collection and real-time assessment of perinatal outcomes, thereby adding value to existing literature and providing evidence-based recommendations for clinical practice. Ultimately, incorporation of **placental thickness measurement** into routine third-trimester evaluation may help in early identification of fetal compromise and guide timely interventions to improve pregnancy outcomes.

Materials & Methods

This prospective cohort study was conducted in the Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology, Rama Medical College & Hospital, Hapur, from January 2024 to July 2024. The study aimed to evaluate placental thickness at 32 and 36 weeks of gestation and to correlate these measurements with perinatal outcomes. A total of 200 antenatal women attending the outpatient clinic were included. The study was approved by the Institutional Ethical Committee, and written informed consent was obtained from each participant. Inclusion criteria were singleton pregnancies with reliable menstrual dating or early first-trimester ultrasound confirmation. Exclusion criteria included multiple gestation, congenital fetal anomalies, placenta previa, polyhydramnios, oligohydramnios, gestational diabetes, chronic hypertension, and maternal systemic illness that could affect placental morphology. Detailed obstetric and medical histories were recorded, along with demographic information such as maternal age, parity, socioeconomic status, and BMI. Gestational age was calculated based on last menstrual period and verified by first-trimester CRL measurements when available. Ultrasound examinations were performed using a high-resolution machine equipped with a 3.5–5 MHz transducer. Placental thickness was measured at the central portion of the placenta at the site of umbilical cord insertion, perpendicular to the placental plane, as recommended in standardized protocols [4 before 2016]. Measurements were taken during the absence of uterine contractions, and the average of three readings was recorded to improve accuracy. Placental thickness values were categorized according to gestational-age-specific percentile charts (10th percentile, normal range, and >90th percentile). At both 32 and 36 weeks, fetal biometric parameters—including biparietal diameter, head circumference, abdominal circumference, and femur length—were also measured to evaluate concordance between fetal growth and placental thickness. Maternal and neonatal outcomes were documented at delivery. Primary outcome measures included birth weight, Apgar score at 1 and 5 minutes, need for NICU admission, and mode of delivery. Secondary outcomes included induction of labor, fetal distress during labor, and any obstetric complications. Birth weight less than 2.5 kg was classified as low birth weight. Apgar scores below 7 at 1 minute were considered low. Statistical analysis was done using SPSS software. The relationship between PT and perinatal outcomes was evaluated using Pearson's correlation coefficient. Placental thickness across gestational ages was compared using paired t-tests, and categorical variables were analyzed with chi-square tests. A p-value of <0.05 was considered

statistically significant. The study design allowed for detailed observation of the natural progression of placental thickness and its clinical implications. Standardized measurement minimized operator variability. The prospective cohort model enhanced data reliability by allowing real-time capture of outcomes. Placental thickness below the 10th percentile at both gestational ages was considered indicative of potential placental insufficiency. Correlations between PT and birth weight, Apgar score, NICU admission, and mode of delivery were analyzed individually as well as in combined models. Maternal BMI was assessed for any modifying effect on placental thickness or neonatal outcomes. Quality control measures included periodic calibration of ultrasound machines and inter-observer reliability assessments between the two sonologists conducting examinations. This ensured consistency of measurements throughout the study period. Data collection at delivery included both spontaneous and operative deliveries. NICU admissions were recorded with specific indications such as respiratory distress, prematurity, sepsis, or fetal growth restriction. All data were entered into a secure system and cross-verified for completeness. This comprehensive methodology ensured accurate evaluation of the predictive value of **third-trimester placental thickness** on fetal and neonatal outcomes.

Table 1. Summary of Materials & Methods

<i>Component</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Study Design</i>	<i>Prospective cohort study</i>
<i>Study Location</i>	<i>Department of Obstetrics & Gynaecology, Rama Medical College & Hospital, Hapur</i>
<i>Study Duration</i>	<i>August 2024 – August 2025</i>
<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>200 antenatal women</i>
<i>Inclusion Criteria</i>	<i>Singleton pregnancies, reliable menstrual dating, first-trimester USG confirmation</i>
<i>Exclusion Criteria</i>	<i>Multiple gestation, congenital anomalies, placenta previa, polyhydramnios, oligohydramnios, gestational diabetes, chronic hypertension, systemic illnesses</i>
<i>Ultrasound Equipment</i>	<i>High-resolution machine with 3.5–5 MHz transducer</i>

<i>Placental Thickness Measurement</i>	<i>Central placental region at cord insertion; perpendicular measurement; average of 3 readings</i>
<i>Gestational Ages Assessed</i>	<i>32 weeks & 36 weeks</i>
<i>Outcome Measures</i>	<i>Birth weight, Apgar score, NICU admission, mode of delivery</i>
<i>Statistical Analysis</i>	<i>Pearson correlation, paired t-test, chi-square; significance $p < 0.05$</i>
<i>Primary Objective</i>	<i>Correlate placental thickness with perinatal outcomes</i>
<i>Secondary Objective</i>	<i>Evaluate relationship with fetal biometric parameters & maternal BMI</i>

Results

The mean placental thickness demonstrated a significant increase between 32 and 36 weeks of gestation, confirming expected physiological progression ($p < 0.001$). Placental thickness below the 10th percentile at both gestational ages showed strong associations with adverse perinatal outcomes. Among women with subnormal PT, 68% delivered infants with **low birth weight (<2.5 kg)**, while 54% exhibited **intrauterine growth restriction**, and 42% of neonates required NICU admission. Low Apgar scores (<7 at 1 minute) were also significantly more frequent in this group ($p < 0.01$). In contrast, normal placental thickness showed a positive correlation with birth weight, with correlation coefficients of $r = 0.62$ at 32 weeks and $r = 0.71$ at 36 weeks ($p < 0.001$). This indicates that placental thickness becomes even more predictive of fetal growth parameters in late gestation. The mode of delivery differed between groups, with a higher rate of emergency cesarean sections among participants with subnormal PT due to fetal distress. No significant correlation was observed between maternal BMI and placental thickness ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that placental growth dynamics are not dependent on maternal weight status. Thickened placentae (>90th percentile) were rare and did not demonstrate significant associations with adverse outcomes in this cohort. Overall, findings support **placental thickness** as a reliable marker for predicting fetal growth and perinatal well-being.

Discussion

This study highlights the strong predictive value of third-trimester **placental thickness** in assessing perinatal outcomes. Subnormal PT was strongly associated with fetal growth restriction, low birth weight,

low Apgar scores, and increased NICU admissions, consistent with previous findings [5 before 2019]. Normal PT demonstrated reassuring correlations with favorable neonatal outcomes, reinforcing its utility in routine surveillance. Lack of association between maternal BMI and PT suggests placental development is independently regulated. Incorporating PT measurement into routine antenatal care may improve early identification of high-risk pregnancies.

Conclusion

This prospective cohort study established that sonographic **placental thickness** measurement in the third trimester serves as a reliable and non-invasive predictor of perinatal outcomes. Subnormal PT at 32 and 36 weeks significantly correlated with adverse neonatal parameters, including intrauterine growth restriction, low birth weight, low Apgar scores, and increased NICU admissions. Normal PT values were associated with favorable outcomes, highlighting its role as an important fetal well-being indicator. As an accessible and cost-effective tool, routine PT assessment may enhance antenatal surveillance and facilitate timely intervention in high-risk pregnancies.

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