Gastric emptying after overnight fasting and clear fluid intake: a prospective investigation using serial magnetic resonance imaging in healthy children†

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Background. Current guidelines recommend preoperative fasting of 2 h for clear fluids, which is often exceeded in routine clinical practice. Existing data on residual gastric volumes in children do not consider fluid intake within <2 h and rely on the aspiration of gastric contents via a gastric tube. This study evaluated the emptying of clear fluids from the stomach using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

Methods. Healthy volunteers aged 6–14 years were asked to fast overnight. MRI scans to assess gastric volumes were obtained before and immediately after drinking 7 ml kg⁻¹ of diluted raspberry syrup and then every 30 min up to 120 min. Volumes were determined by a blinded investigator and indexed gastric fluid/air volumes (GFVw/GAVw) and half-life (t₁/₂) of GFVw course after clear fluid intake were calculated.

Results. Sixteen children, median age 9.2 (range 6.4–12.8) years, were investigated. Median (range) GFVw was 0.62 (0.15–0.97) ml kg⁻¹ before and 6.68 (4.77–7.78) ml kg⁻¹ immediately after fluid intake, and 2.92 (0.43–5.04), 1.27 (0.28–3.62), 0.42 (0.07–2.49), and 0.32 (0.04–1.13) ml kg⁻¹ 30, 60, 90, and 120 min thereafter. Median GFVw declined exponentially (t₁/₂ = 26.1 min). Median individual t₁/₂ was 23.6 (range 17.9–47.8) min. GAVw showed considerable intra- and inter-individual variation.

Conclusions. In healthy school children, gastric emptying after ingestion of clear fluid occurs with a median half-life time of <30 min but with considerable inter-individual variation.

Keywords: age groups, child; diagnostic imaging, magnetic resonance imaging; diet, fasting diet; preoperative period; surgical procedures, operative; upper gastrointestinal tract, stomach

Accepted for publication: 13 April 2011

Editor’s key points

- There are few data on residual gastric volumes in fasting children.
- This study estimated gastric air and fluid volumes for up to 120 min after ingestion of 7 ml kg⁻¹ clear fluids.
- Fasting gastric volumes were greater than previous studies.
- Median half time for gastric emptying was <30 min, but with large inter-individual variations.
- These data support the existing guidelines of 2 h fluid fast before elective surgery.

Short fasting times in children are appropriate to improve hydration, patient comfort, and cooperation at time of induction of anaesthesia. Established liberal fasting guidelines, prescribing minimal pre-anaesthetic fasting of 2 h for clear fluids,¹ are often exceeded in clinical routine.²–⁴

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) produces high-resolution images that allow discrimination between gastric wall, air, and fluid contents. In vitro measurements show excellent correlation with phantom volumes.⁵ MRI is non-invasive, investigator independent, and reproducible, and allows volumetric assessment of organs without geometrical assumptions. In adults, MRI has been applied to examine gastric volume and emptying⁶–¹¹ and in a preoperative fasting context to measure gastric emptying after carbohydrate drinks.¹² However, most investigations in children rely on aspiration via an oro- or nasogastric tube to determine gastric volume.¹³ It has been suggested that this technique might underestimate true gastric contents volume.¹⁴ Moreover, aspiration is limited to fluid so that intragastric air volume has not been considered. So far, published data in children do not include gastric residual volumes within <2 h after drinking clear fluids, and the time course in individual subjects is ignored because repetitive volume measurements are lacking.¹³

The aim of this study was to investigate by means of MRI gastric contents and air volumes and the time course of gastric emptying in healthy children after overnight fasting and ingestion of a defined amount of standardized clear fluid.

†Presented in part at the 2010 annual meeting of the Swiss Society of Anaesthesia and Resuscitation (SGAR).

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Preliminary results were presented at the annual meeting 2010 of the Swiss Society of Anaesthesia and Resuscitation (SGAR).\textsuperscript{15}

**Methods**

The study was approved by the local ethics committee (ref: KEK-ZH-Nr. 2009-0147) and registered with ClinicalTrials.gov (ref: NCT01133691). Flyers with general announcement of this study were addressed to potential participants by friends, colleagues, relatives, and their children. Approximately 60 flyers were distributed, and ~40 parents/children were informed comprehensively. Sixteen healthy children volunteered with written informed consent of their parents, none retracted. Children were informed in details as adequate to their age and rewarded for undertaking the study with a symbolical gift voucher (book, music, or sports store) to the value of SFr 50.

Inclusion criteria were age 6–14 years, ASA physical status class I or II, and the absence of any gastrointestinal disease or functional disturbances. Children without capacity to participate after overnight fasting or who would not keep immobile for 2 to 3 min in an MRI scanner, or suffered from claustrophobia or any other psychiatric disorder were excluded.

Children were not allowed to drink or eat after midnight. After a first MRI to assess residual gastric volumes, children received 7 ml kg\(^{-1}\) diluted raspberry syrup to be drunk within 5 min. This clear and non-carbonated liquid was prepared in a standardized manner, using commercially available raspberry syrup and drinking water (energy content 135 kJ and carbohydrate concentration 8 g per 100 ml drinking solution). Further, MRI scans were obtained immediately after fluid intake and subsequently after 30, 60, 90, and 120 min.

All MRI scans were performed on a 1.5 Tesla system (Signa Twinspeed HDxt, GE Medical Systems, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA) using an 8-channel, 8-element phased array coil covering the entire stomach. After a coronal localizer, contiguous axial steady-state free precession images (FIESTA) were recorded in the entire stomach. After a coronal localizer, contiguous axial steady-state free precession images (FIESTA) were recorded. Further, MRI scans were obtained immediately after fluid intake and subsequently after 30, 60, 90, and 120 min. This clear and non-carbonated liquid was prepared in a standardized manner, using commercially available raspberry syrup and drinking water (energy content 135 kJ and carbohydrate concentration 8 g per 100 ml drinking solution). Further, MRI scans were obtained immediately after fluid intake and subsequently after 30, 60, 90, and 120 min.

An exponential (EXP) time course of GFV\(_w\) after fluid intake was assumed in case of linear correlation between logarithms (LN) of GFV\(_w\) and fasting time. Half-life \(t_{1/2}\) of individual

and medium GFV\(_w\) reduction were obtained as \(t_{1/2} = \text{LN}(0.5) / B\), with \(B\) as non-standardized regression coefficient from simple linear regression. Median GFV\(_w\) values after fluid intake were also fitted into an exponential function using special curve fitting software (IDL 7.1, ITT Visual Information Solutions, Boulder, CO, USA). Regression coefficients (Pearson) between individual \(t_{1/2}\) as well as gastric volumes and probable confounders were determined. The Wilcoxon test was used to compare volumes pair-wise, considering a two-tailed \(P\)-value < 0.05 to designate statistical significance. Data are presented as median (range) unless indicated otherwise. Microsoft Office Excel 2003 (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA) and SPSS Statistics 17.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) were used for data analysis.

**Results**

Ninety-six MRI scans with median GFV 33 (range 1–312) ml and GAV 33 (3–223) ml were acquired in 16 volunteers (Tables 1 and 2).

Inter-individual variation in GFV\(_w\) increased after drinking (Fig. 1A and C). Up to 1 h after drinking the syrup, GFV\(_w\) had declined to \(<50\%\) of the corresponding maximum measured GFV\(_w\) in 15 of 16 children (94%), and GFV\(_w\) was \(<2\) or \(<1\) ml kg\(^{-1}\) in 14 or 7 out of 16 children (88 or 44%), respectively (Fig. 2). After 90 and 120 min, GFV\(_w\) was less than the initial value after overnight fasting in 10 of 16 participants (63%). After 120 min, median GFV\(_w\) did not differ significantly

- **Table 1** Characteristics of volunteering children (overall: \(n = 16\); female: \(n = 6\); male: \(n = 10\)) presented as median (range).\(^*\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>9.2 (6.4–12.8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weight (kg)</td>
<td>31.8 (21.6–40.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentile of weight*</td>
<td>44 (6–85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height (cm)</td>
<td>140 (120–161)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentile of height*</td>
<td>54 (16–100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMI(_w) (kg m(^{-2}))</td>
<td>15.7 (14.1–19.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^*\)According to ‘2000 CDC Growth Charts for the United States: Method and development’ (http://iea.de/perz/index.htm). \(^\circ\)BMI, body mass index calculated as weight (kg) height\(^{-2}\) (m)\(^2\).

- **Table 2** Body weight corrected gastric fluid/air volume (GFV\(_w\)/GAV\(_w\)) after overnight fasting/before fluid intake (‘Pre’) and subsequently after drinking 7 ml kg\(^{-1}\) raspberry syrup (immediately, then every 30 min). Data presented as median (range)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>GFV(_w) (ml kg(^{-1}))</th>
<th>GAV(_w) (ml kg(^{-1}))</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>0.62 (0.15–0.97)</td>
<td>1.33 (0.20–5.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0–5 min</td>
<td>6.68 (4.77–7.78)</td>
<td>1.82 (0.12–6.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 min</td>
<td>2.92 (0.43–5.04)</td>
<td>2.03 (0.38–7.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 min</td>
<td>1.27 (0.28–3.62)</td>
<td>1.60 (0.25–6.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90 min</td>
<td>0.42 (0.07–2.49)</td>
<td>0.93 (0.18–6.44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120 min</td>
<td>0.32 (0.04–1.13)</td>
<td>0.58 (0.13–1.98)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
from the initial value after overnight fasting ($P = 0.096$) and no case was $> 2 \text{ ml kg}^{-1}$.

Median values of GFV$_w$ declined exponentially after ingestion of syrup, as illustrated in Figure 1C ($t_{1/2} = 26.1$ min, $R = -0.988$, $P < 0.01$). With IDL curve fitting software, a similar half-life time was calculated ($t_{1/2} = 24.8$ min; $Y = A \text{ EXP}(B X) + C$ with $A = 6.68$, $B = -0.028$, $C = 0.004$). Not all the individual GFV$_w$ curves showed perfect exponential decline $[R = -0.92 (-0.79 \text{ to } -0.99)]$, and the estimated individual half-life times varied considerably [23.6 (17.9–47.8) min].

GAV$_w$ showed more variation compared with GFV$_w$, especially after overnight fasting and immediately after fluid ingestion (Fig. 1a and c). GAV$_w$ continued to increase until 30–90 min post-syrup in most children, but declined below the initial value after 120 min ($P = 0.008$). The course of GAV$_w$ after fluid intake was only weakly related to time ($R = -0.30$, $P < 0.01$, $n = 80$). Except for the examinations immediately and 30 min after drinking, median GAV$_w$ was larger than median GFV$_w$, ($P < 0.05$ before and 90/120 min after drinking; $P = 0.13$ after 60 min).

Neither $t_{1/2}$, nor GFV$_w$, nor GAV$_w$ correlated with age, weight/height percentile, or BMI.

**Discussion**

This study aimed to assess time course of gastric contents in healthy children after overnight fasting and drinking clear fluid, using MRI. The major finding was that GFV decreased rapidly with a median half-life of $< 30$ min after drinking 7 ml kg$^{-1}$ of a standardized clear fluid.

Baseline GFV$_w$ of 0.62 ml kg$^{-1}$ assessed with MRI was higher than most gastric volumes in other paediatric studies reviewed by Brady and colleagues. This supports the prior suggestion that gastric volume may be underestimated by the aspiration technique with gastric tube and syringe. The same was true when gastric contents were collected with the help of endoscopy. Median volumes of 0.3 and 0.2 ml kg$^{-1}$ were found in children requiring oesophago-gastroduodenoscopy who underwent bone marrow transplantation or were in the control group with other gastrointestinal disorders, respectively. However, human data indicating a clear threshold volume for the risk
of pulmonary aspiration are lacking, as described by Cook-Sather and Litman.17

MRI studies in adults have shown the following elimination half-times: 38 min for 500 ml of glucose 10%,6 100–130 min for several meals and liquid nutrients;7 8 21, 31, 47, and 107 min for water, non-carbonated carbohydrates, carbonated carbohydrates, and carbonated cola;11 47 vs 78/82 min for 400 ml of a clear carbohydrate solution compared with 300/400 ml of carbohydrate solution containing additional glutamine and antioxidants in 20 volunteers.12 In contrast to other investigators who corrected for gastric secretion by labelling meals with gadolinium to quantify progressive dilution through gastric or saliva secretion,7 in our current study on children no contrast agent was administered.

GAVw showed immense intra- and inter-individual variation and did not empty in strictly time-dependent manner as previously described.11 While intragastric air plays a role in the gastric accommodation of meals8 its impact on regurgitation, vomiting, and pulmonary aspiration during anaesthesia induction remains unclear.

While the incidence of pulmonary aspiration with severe morbidity is low in children anaesthetized for elective surgery,18 there are several advantages of a short fasting period,17 such as prevention of dehydration, hypoglycaemia, improved quality of induction, and patient comfort. The presented data support that the existing guidelines of 2 h fluid fast are appropriate and an extension is not required. Further reduction in the pre-anaesthetic fasting time for clear fluid might be beneficial to optimize perioperative organizational processes and to further improve patient comfort. However, the impact of a smaller amount of liquid and previous light meals on gastric emptying in children requires further investigation, especially in the light of the inter-individual variability of half-life time and residual gastric volumes.

Several limitations may be considered. In contrast to the healthy children volunteering to our study, patients in pre-anaesthetic situations may suffer from pain or fear, possibly impairing gastric emptying. Furthermore, the results may not be transferable to children with higher ASA classification or gastrointestinal disorders. The number of volunteers participating in this study is relatively small but did allow for a prospective design with standardized drinks, controlled conditions, scheduled serial measurements, and a standardized and blinded evaluation.

In conclusion, gastric emptying after ingestion of clear fluid in healthy school children was observed with a median half-life of GFV of <30 min. Half-life and residual gastric volume within the first hour after drinking show considerable inter-individual variation. MRI is a suitable, non-invasive, and safe technique for determination of gastric volumes in children without need of contrast agents or invasive procedures.

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank M. Makki (physicist) and R. Klaghofer (biostatistician) for their assistance in data analysis, and all the volunteering children and their parents for participating and supporting this study.

**Conflict of interest**

None declared.

**Funding**

Departmental resources.

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