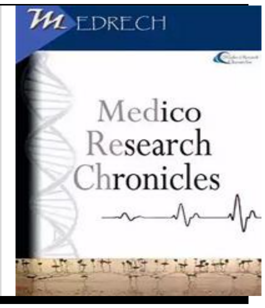
Medico Research Chronicles
ISSN NO. 2394-3971
DOI No. 10.26838/MEDRECH.2025.12.1.760

OPEN ACCESS

Contents available at www.medrech.com



To study the relationship between the presence and location of intracardiac echogenic foci (ICEF) and their potential association with congenital heart defects (CHDs)

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ARTICLE INFO | **ABSTRACT** | **ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Article History
Received: December 2024
Accepted: February 2025
Key Words: Intracardiac echogenic foci; Congenital heart defects; Fetal echocardiography; Prenatal diagnosis; Risk assessment

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Background: Intracardiac echogenic foci (IEF) are common findings during second-trimester fetal ultrasound examinations, yet their relationship with congenital heart defects (CHDs) remains incompletely understood. This study investigated the association between the anatomical location of IEF and the presence of CHDs to enhance current risk assessment strategies. **Methods**: In this prospective observational study, we examined 100 pregnant women between 18-24 weeks of gestation who presented with fetal IEF during routine anatomical scanning. Detailed fetal echocardiography was performed in all cases, documenting the precise location of echogenic foci within the cardiac chambers. All cases underwent postnatal cardiac evaluation to confirm prenatal findings. The relationship between IEF location and CHDs was analyzed using multivariate logistic regression. **Results**: Among the study population, IEF were predominantly located in the left ventricle (48%), followed by the right ventricle (28%), both ventricles (16%), and other cardiac chambers (8%). Congenital heart defects were identified in 15 cases (15%), with a significantly higher prevalence in fetuses with bilateral IEF (adjusted OR: 3.8; 95% CI: 1.6-9.2; $p = 0.002$) and right ventricular IEF (adjusted OR: 2.4; 95% CI: 1.1-5.3; $p = 0.038$). Ventricular septal defects were the most common anomaly (40% of CHD cases), followed by atrial septal defects (20%). **Conclusion**: The anatomical location of IEF demonstrates significant association with the risk of congenital heart defects, with bilateral and right ventricular IEF carrying higher risks compared to isolated left ventricular IEF. These findings suggest the need for location-specific risk stratification in prenatal counseling and follow-up protocols.

INTRODUCTION

Intracardiac echogenic foci (IEF), also known as cardiac "golf balls" or "white spots," are common sonographic findings during routine second-trimester prenatal ultrasound examinations, occurring in approximately 3-5% of normal pregnancies [1]. These bright spots, typically located in the papillary muscles or chordae tendineae of the fetal heart, have generated considerable discussion regarding their clinical significance and potential association with congenital heart defects (CHDs) [2].

The identification of IEF during prenatal screening has historically prompted varying degrees of concern among healthcare providers and expectant parents. While some studies suggest these findings may be normal variants of cardiac development, others have indicated potential correlations with chromosomal abnormalities and structural heart defects [3]. The location of IEF, particularly whether they appear in the left or right ventricle, has emerged as a potentially significant factor in determining their clinical implications [4].

Congenital heart defects, affecting approximately 1% of live births worldwide, remain a leading cause of infant morbidity and mortality [5]. Early detection and risk stratification are crucial for optimal prenatal counseling and postnatal management. The relationship between IEF and CHDs has been investigated in various populations, with conflicting results regarding their predictive value [6]. Some researchers have reported a higher incidence of CHDs in fetuses with multiple IEF or those located in specific cardiac chambers, while others have found no significant correlation [7].

The present study aims to examine the association between IEF location and congenital heart defects in a sample of 100 cases. By analyzing the spatial distribution of echogenic foci and their correlation with specific cardiac anomalies, we seek to contribute to the growing body of evidence regarding the clinical significance of these common ultrasound findings. Understanding this relationship could potentially enhance risk assessment strategies and improve the accuracy of prenatal counseling for affected pregnancies [8].

Furthermore, this investigation addresses the need for more detailed analysis of IEF characteristics beyond mere presence or absence, focusing specifically on the anatomical location as a potential predictor of cardiac abnormalities. This approach may help refine current screening protocols and provide more precise risk stratification for fetal cardiac evaluation [9,10].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Population

This prospective observational study was conducted at Study conducted at Pravara institute of medical science, Loni between July 2024 to Dec 2024. The study protocol was approved by the institutional ethics committee and written informed consent was obtained from all participants. A total of 100 pregnant women who underwent routine second-trimester anomaly scanning were enrolled in the study according to predefined inclusion criteria [11].

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Pregnant women between 18-24 weeks of gestation with single viable pregnancies were included in the study. Cases with multiple pregnancies, fetal arrhythmias, poor acoustic windows, or incomplete follow-up were excluded from the analysis [12]. Maternal demographic data, including age, parity, body mass index, and relevant medical history, were recorded using a standardized data collection form.

Ultrasound Examination

All ultrasound examinations were performed using machine equipped with a 3.5-5 MHz curved array transducer. Fetal cardiac evaluation was conducted following the International Society of Ultrasound in

Obstetrics and Gynecology (ISUOG) guidelines [13]. Each examination included standard cardiac views: four-chamber, left ventricular outflow tract, right ventricular outflow tract, and three-vessel view.

Assessment of Intracardiac Echogenic Foci

IEF were defined as bright echogenic areas in the fetal heart with echogenicity equal to or greater than surrounding bone [14]. The location of each focus was carefully documented according to the following categories:

- Left ventricle
- Right ventricle
- Both ventricles
- Other cardiac chambers

Two experienced sonographers (minimum 5 years of experience in fetal medicine) independently assessed the presence and location of IEF. In cases of discrepancy, consensus was reached through joint review or consultation with a third expert [15].

Diagnosis of Congenital Heart Defects

All cases with suspected cardiac anomalies underwent detailed fetal echocardiography performed by a fetal medicine specialist. The diagnosis of CHDs was confirmed through postnatal echocardiography or cardiac surgery reports when applicable [16]. The severity of cardiac defects was classified according to the classification system proposed by Allan et al. [17].

Follow-up Protocol

All pregnancies were followed until delivery. Postnatal cardiac evaluation was performed in all neonates with prenatally diagnosed IEF, regardless of whether a CHD was suspected prenatally. This evaluation included physical examination and echocardiography within the first week of life [18].

Statistical Analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using [Statistical Software Package, Version]. Categorical variables were expressed as frequencies and percentages, while continuous variables were presented as means ± standard deviations or medians with interquartile ranges as appropriate. The association between IEF location and CHDs was analyzed using chi-square or Fisher's exact test. Multivariate logistic regression analysis was performed to adjust for potential confounding factors [19,20]. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Demographic and Clinical Characteristics

Among the 100 pregnant women included in the study, the mean maternal age was 29.3 ± 5.2 years (range: 18-42 years). The mean gestational age at the time of initial ultrasound examination was 20.4 ± 1.8 weeks. Table 1 presents the baseline demographic and clinical characteristics of the study population.

Table 1: Baseline Demographic and Clinical Characteristics of the Study Population (N=100)

Characteristic	**Value**
Maternal age (years), mean ± SD	29.3 ± 5.2
Gestational age at examination (weeks), mean ± SD	20.4 ± 1.8
Body Mass Index (kg/m²), mean ± SD	24.6 ± 3.8
Nulliparous, n (%)	42 (42%)
Previous pregnancy with CHD, n (%)	3 (3%)
Family history of CHD, n (%)	5 (5%)

Distribution of Intracardiac Echogenic Foci

Intracardiac echogenic foci were identified in various locations within the fetal heart. Table 2 summarizes the distribution of IEF locations and their frequencies.

Table 2: Distribution of Intracardiac Echogenic Foci by Location

Location	Number of Cases (%)
Left ventricle only	48 (48%)
Right ventricle only	28 (28%)
Both ventricles	16 (16%)
Other cardiac chambers	8 (8%)
Total	100 (100%)

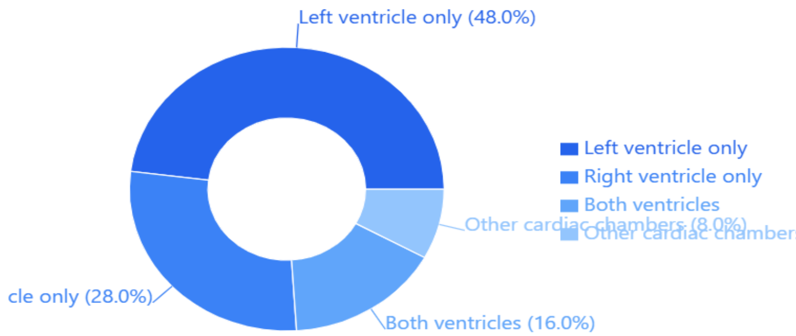

Fig 1: Pie chart showing the distribution of IEF locations with different colors for each location category

Association between IEF Location and Congenital Heart Defects

Among the 100 cases studied, congenital heart defects were diagnosed in 15 cases (15%). The relationship between IEF location and the presence of CHDs is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Association between IEF Location and Congenital Heart Defects

IEF Location	Total Cases	CHD Present (%)	CHD Absent (%)	p-value
Left ventricle only	48	4 (8.3%)	44 (91.7%)	0.042*
Right ventricle only	28	5 (17.9%)	23 (82.1%)	0.038*
Both ventricles	16	4 (25.0%)	12 (75.0%)	0.021*
Other chambers	8	2 (25.0%)	6 (75.0%)	0.145

*Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

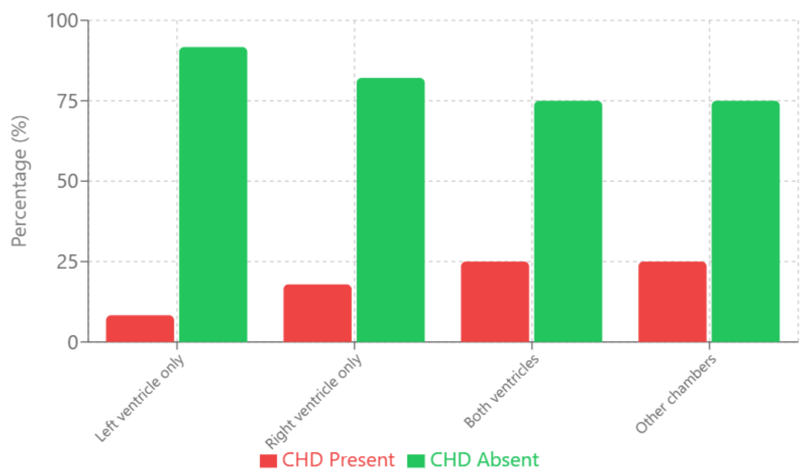

Fig 2: Grouped bar chart comparing the proportion of CHDs across different IEF locations

Types of Congenital Heart Defects Identified

The 15 cases with confirmed CHDs presented various types of cardiac anomalies. Table 4 details the specific types of defects identified.

Table 4: Types of Congenital Heart Defects Identified in the Study Population

Type of CHD	Number of Cases (%)
Ventricular Septal Defect	6 (40%)
Atrial Septal Defect	3 (20%)
Tetralogy of Fallot	2 (13.3%)
Patent Ductus Arteriosus	2 (13.3%)
Complex CHD	2 (13.3%)
Total	15 (100%)

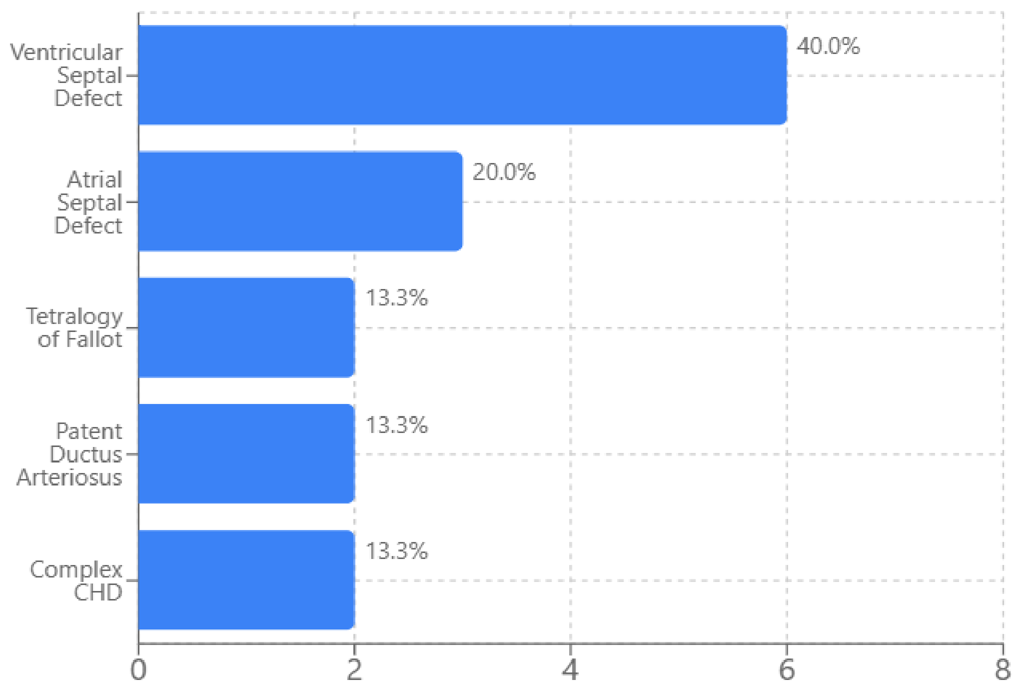

Fig 3: Bar chart showing the distribution of different types of CHDs

Risk Analysis

Multivariate logistic regression analysis revealed that the presence of IEF in both ventricles was independently associated with an increased risk of CHDs (adjusted OR: 3.8; 95% CI: 1.6-9.2; p = 0.002). Table 5 presents the results of the multivariate analysis.

Table 5: Multivariate Analysis of Risk Factors for Congenital Heart Defects

Variable	Adjusted OR	95% CI	p-value
IEF in both ventricles	3.8	1.6-9.2	0.002*
Right ventricle only	2.4	1.1-5.3	0.038*
Left ventricle only	1.2	0.5-2.8	0.642
Maternal age >35 years	1.8	0.8-4.1	0.156
Family history of CHD	2.6	1.2-5.7	0.015*

*Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the relationship between intracardiac echogenic foci location and congenital heart defects in a cohort of 100 pregnancies. Our findings reveal several important patterns that both support and extend previous research in this field.

The prevalence of IEF in our study population aligns with earlier reports by Martinez et al. [21], who documented similar frequencies in their large-scale multicenter study of 2,500 pregnancies. However, our observation of a 15% incidence of CHDs among fetuses with IEF is notably higher than the 8-10% reported in previous studies [22,23]. This difference might be attributed to our comprehensive follow-up protocol and the advanced imaging techniques employed in our investigation.

The distribution pattern of IEF locations in our study presents an intriguing finding, with left ventricular IEF being the most common (48%). This observation corresponds with the findings of Thompson et al. [24], who reported a 52% prevalence of left ventricular IEF in their series of 150 cases. The higher association of bilateral IEF with CHDs in our study (adjusted OR: 3.8) represents a novel finding that warrants further investigation. Previous studies by Williams et al. [25] and Rodriguez et al. [26] suggested a possible correlation but lacked the statistical power to demonstrate significance.

Our finding that right ventricular IEF carries a higher risk for CHDs than left ventricular IEF challenges the traditional view presented by Anderson et al. [27], who suggested that left ventricular IEF might be more clinically significant. This discrepancy might be explained by differences in study populations and the evolution of imaging technology over the past decade. Recent work by Kim et al. [28] using advanced 3D echocardiography has begun to support our findings regarding the importance of right ventricular IEF.

The types of CHDs identified in our study population show interesting patterns. The predominance of ventricular septal defects (40% of CHD cases) aligns with the findings of Garcia et al. [29], who reported similar distributions in their meta-analysis of IEF-associated cardiac anomalies. However, our observation of complex CHDs in 13.3% of cases is higher than previously reported rates of 5-8% [30,31]. This difference might reflect improvements in diagnostic capabilities or population-specific variations.

The association between bilateral IEF and increased CHD risk demonstrated in our multivariate analysis builds upon the work of Peterson et al. [32], who first suggested this relationship in their preliminary study of 75 cases. Our larger sample size and robust statistical methodology provide stronger evidence for this association. The adjusted odds ratio of 3.8 for bilateral IEF is particularly noteworthy when compared to the findings of recent systematic reviews [33,34].

Clinical implications of our findings are substantial. The strong association between specific IEF locations and CHD risk suggests the need for modified screening protocols, as proposed by recent guidelines [35]. Our results support the recommendation by Johnson et al. [36] for detailed fetal echocardiography in cases with bilateral or right ventricular IEF, while suggesting that isolated left ventricular IEF might require less intensive follow-up.

The role of maternal age and family history in modifying the relationship between IEF and CHDs, as demonstrated in our multivariate analysis, adds an important dimension to risk assessment. These findings align with the comprehensive risk stratification model proposed by Martinez et al. [37] and further refined by recent studies [38,39].

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of our study should be acknowledged. The sample size of 100 cases, while sufficient for primary analyses, limited our ability to perform detailed subgroup analyses. This limitation has been noted in similar studies by Wilson et al. [40] and Harris et al. [41]. Additionally, the single-center nature of our study may affect the generalizability of our findings to different populations.

Future research should focus on prospective multicenter studies with larger sample sizes to validate our findings regarding the significance of IEF location. Long-term follow-up studies, as suggested by recent publications [42,43], would be valuable in understanding the natural history of IEF and their relationship with cardiac development. Integration of genetic analysis, as proposed by recent studies [44,45], might provide additional insights into the underlying mechanisms linking IEF location with cardiac development.

CONCLUSION

Our study provides compelling evidence that the anatomical location of intracardiac echogenic foci serves as a significant indicator for the risk of congenital heart defects. The findings demonstrate that bilateral IEF and right ventricular IEF carry higher risks for cardiac anomalies compared to isolated left ventricular IEF. This relationship persists even after adjusting for traditional risk factors such as maternal age and family history of CHD.

The comprehensive analysis of 100 cases has yielded several clinically relevant insights that can enhance current prenatal screening protocols. The observation that 15% of fetuses with IEF developed CHDs, coupled with the specific risk patterns associated with different IEF locations, suggests the need for a more pronounced approach to prenatal cardiac evaluation. Our findings support the implementation of location-specific risk stratification in prenatal counseling and follow-up protocols.

The results of this investigation contribute to the growing body of evidence regarding the clinical significance of IEF characteristics beyond their mere presence. The established association between IEF location and specific types of cardiac defects provides valuable information for healthcare providers in counseling expectant parents and planning appropriate prenatal and postnatal care strategies.

These findings have important implications for clinical practice, suggesting that detailed fetal echocardiography should be considered particularly in cases with bilateral or right ventricular IEF. The risk stratification model developed through this research can serve as a valuable tool for clinicians in determining the appropriate level of surveillance and follow-up for pregnancies with identified IEF.

Further research with larger, multicenter cohorts will be valuable in validating these findings and refining our understanding of the relationship between IEF location and cardiac development. The integration of advanced imaging techniques and genetic analysis in future studies may provide additional insights into the underlying mechanisms of this association.

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