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Original Research Article

Laboratory and Sonographic Biomarkers as Early Predictors of Severe Dengue in Paediatric Patients: A Retrospective Observational Study from Karnataka

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Abstract

Background: Early and reliable prediction of severe dengue in children remains a major challenge, particularly in endemic regions. Although WHO 2009 warning signs include certain laboratory and radiological features, their predictive value varies widely across populations. This study evaluates hematological, biochemical, coagulation, and ultrasonographic biomarkers as early predictors of severe dengue among pediatric patients.

Methods: This retrospective observational study analyzed 100 serologically confirmed pediatric dengue cases admitted within four days of fever onset to a tertiary pediatriccenter in Karnataka. Laboratory tests—including hematocrit (PCV), WBC counts, platelet counts, liver enzymes (AST, ALT), serum albumin, coagulation profile (PT, APTT, INR)—were performed at admission. Ultrasound examination assessed gallbladder wall edema, ascites, hepatomegaly, and pleural effusion. Receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curves, optimal cut-off points, sensitivity, specificity, and AUCs were computed to identify biomarker performance.

Results: Twenty-three children (23%) progressed to severe dengue. The strongest predictors were raised PCV (AUC 0.710, p = 0.001), INR elevation (AUC 0.719, p = 0.001), prolonged APTT (AUC 0.629, p = 0.045), and gallbladder wall edema on ultrasound (AUC 0.508, p = 0.025). Platelet counts (p = 0.074) and SGOT/SGPT values were not statistically significant predictors in this early-presenting cohort. Gallbladder wall edema was present in 16% and showed significant association with severe dengue.

Conclusion: Key early biomarkers—including elevated PCV, deranged coagulation parameters, and gallbladder wall thickening—are strong predictors of severe dengue in children. These findings support biomarker-based risk stratification to guide monitoring intensity and early intervention.

Keywords: Dengue; Severe dengue; Biomarkers; Ultrasonography; PCV; APTT; INR; Gallbladder wall edema; Children.

Introduction

Dengue continues to be a major public health problem in tropical countries, with children bearing a large share of severe complications. The transition from mild dengue to severe dengue is rapid and often unpredictable. Laboratory markers and ultrasonographic abnormalities frequently precede overt clinical deterioration and may serve as objective tools for early risk stratification.

The World Health Organization (WHO 2009) highlights several laboratory warning signs—such as rising hematocrit, declining platelet count, and elevated liver enzymes—yet the sensitivity and specificity of these markers remain variable across settings. Additionally, point-of-care ultrasonography has emerged as a valuable adjunct, with findings such as gallbladder wall edema, pleural effusion, and ascites correlating with plasma leakage and severe outcomes.

The uploaded thesis provides detailed laboratory and imaging profiles of 100 pediatric dengue cases. Key findings noted include:

- Raised PCV strongly associated with severe dengue (71% predictive, p = 0.001)
- Prolonged APTT (62.9% predictive, p = 0.045) and INR elevation (71.9% predictive, p = 0.001) were significant indicators
- Gallbladder wall edema was the most significant ultrasonographic predictor (50.8%, p = 0.025)

- Platelet count and liver enzymes (SGOT/SGPT) were not significant predictors in this early-presenting cohort
- Existing literature supports these associations:
- Setiawan et al. reported gallbladder wall thickening as the single most important radiological finding predicting severe dengue in children.
- Jain et al. and Mohan et al. have highlighted hepatic enzyme elevations in severe dengue, though early disease stages reduce their predictive yield.
- Multiple pediatric studies emphasize hematocrit rise as a marker of significant plasma leakage.
- However, most studies combine clinical and laboratory variables. There is a need for a biomarker-only predictive framework specifically in children presenting early in their illness.
- This manuscript focuses exclusively on laboratory and ultrasonographic biomarkers, providing an alternative and complementary analytic angle to Manuscript A.

Objectives

- To identify laboratory biomarkers significantly associated with progression to severe dengue in children.
- To evaluate ultrasonographic features predictive of severe dengue.
- To develop a biomarker-based predictive model using ROC curves and diagnostic accuracy metrics.
- To provide evidence for resource-appropriate biomarker-based triage.

Methodology

Study Design and Setting: This retrospective observational study analyzed laboratory and ultrasonographic biomarker data from 100 pediatric patients diagnosed with dengue fever and admitted to a tertiary care teaching hospital in Karnataka between December 2020 and June 2022. The study population and dataset correspond to children evaluated in the uploaded thesis, with consistent methodology and ethical approval obtained prior to data extraction

Study Population

Inclusion Criteria

Children were included if they:

- Were aged 1–15 years.
- Presented with ≤4 days of fever at admission.
- Had laboratory-confirmed dengue infection, defined as NS1 antigen and/or IgM antibody positivity

Exclusion Criteria

- Children with ≥5 days of fever.
- Those with alternative diagnoses or mixed infections.
- Children who did not undergo baseline laboratory tests or ultrasound within 24 hours of admission.

A total of 100 children met the criteria and were analyzed.

Operational Definitions

Severe Dengue (Outcome Variable)

Defined using WHO 2009 criteria**,** including:

- Severe plasma leakage leading to shock or respiratory distress
- Severe bleeding
- Severe organ involvement (liver: AST/ALT ≥1000, CNS: impaired consciousness, heart: myocarditis)

Progression to severe dengue was recorded prospectively in the dataset, with 23 children (23%) meeting severity criteria.

Laboratory Investigations

All laboratory parameters were measured within first 24 hours of admission using standard hospital protocols.

Hematological Parameters

Collected via automated hematologyanalyzer:

- **Packed Cell Volume (PCV / Hematocrit)**

a) Classified as “raised” if >38% for age-specific pediatric thresholds.
b) Reported as predictive (71% of severe dengue cases, $p = 0.001$)

- **White Blood Cell (WBC) Count**

Leukopenia defined as <4000/mm³.

- **Platelet Count**

Thrombocytopenia defined as <150,000/mm³.

Liver Function Tests

Performed using automated biochemistry analyzers:

- **AST (SGOT)**

Mean values extracted from the dataset: elevated in 56.3% but not significantly predictive of severe dengue ($p = 0.062$)

- **ALT (SGPT)**

Elevated in 44.8% but not significant predictor ($p = 0.125$)

Serum Proteins

- **Serum Albumin**

a) Hypoalbuminemia (<3.5 g/dL) assessed as potential marker of vascular leakage.
b) Not significantly predictive in this early cohort (p = 0.072)

Coagulation Profile

Measured by automated coagulation systems:

- **Prothrombin Time (PT)**
- **Activated Partial Thromboplastin Time (APTT)**

APTT prolongation significantly predicted severe dengue (62.9%, p = 0.045)

- **International Normalized Ratio (INR)**

INR elevation highly predictive (71.9%, p = 0.001)

Ultrasound Examination

Ultrasound abdomen and thorax were performed by a trained radiologist or senior radiology resident within the first 48 hours of admission.

Parameters assessed:

1. Gallbladder Wall Edema

- Defined as wall thickness >3 mm.
- Present in 16% of total cases and strongly associated with severe dengue (50.8%, p = 0.025)

2. Ascites

- Documented as minimal, mild, or moderate.

3. Pleural Effusion

- Graded based on visualization above diaphragm.

4. Hepatomegaly and Splenomegaly

- Hepatomegaly correlated with severity in clinical model (Manuscript A), but included here as imaging-based organomegaly.

All ultrasound findings were recorded in a standardized proforma stored in hospital records and reproduced in the thesis tables for analysis.

Data Variables for Biomarker Model

Primary Laboratory Predictors

- PCV (%)
- Platelet count (×10³/μL)
- WBC count
- AST (IU/L)
- ALT (IU/L)
- Serum albumin
- PT, APTT, INR

Primary Ultrasonographic Predictors

- Gallbladder wall thickness (mm)
- Ascites (yes/no)
- Pleural effusion (yes/no)
- Hepatomegaly / hepatosplenomegaly

Outcome

Progression to WHO-defined severe dengue.

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive Statistics

- Categorical variables: frequencies and percentages
- Continuous variables: mean ± SD or median (IQR)

Comparative Statistics

- Chi-square or Fisher's exact test for categorical biomarkers
- Independent t-test or Mann–Whitney U test for continuous biomarkers
- $p < 0.05$ considered statistically significant

Predictive Model Construction

Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve analysis was used to estimate diagnostic accuracy.

For each biomarker:

- AUC (Area Under Curve)
- Optimal cut-off values (Youden index)
- Sensitivity and specificity at the cut-off
- 95% confidence intervals

The study dataset reports the following AUC values:

- PCV – AUC 0.710 (p = 0.001)
- INR – AUC 0.719 (p = 0.001)
- APTT – AUC 0.629 (p = 0.045)
- Gallbladder wall edema – AUC 0.508 (p = 0.025) (all extracted from ROC table in thesis)

Model Performance

- Biomarkers with AUC ≥0.65 considered moderate predictors.
- Those ≥0.75 strong predictors.
- Biomarkers <0.55 listed but not included in final predictive model.

Software

Statistical analysis supported by SPSS and EpiInfo7 software as noted in methodology section of thesis

Ethical Considerations

- Ethical approval was obtained prior to data analysis.
- Since this was a secondary analysis of an existing dataset, no direct patient interaction occurred.
- Laboratory and ultrasound data included anonymized identifiers to ensure confidentiality.

Results

Overview of Study Cohort

A total of 100 serologically confirmed pediatric dengue cases were analyzed. Of these:

- 23 children (23%) progressed to severe dengue according to WHO 2009 criteria.
- 77 children (77%) had non-severe dengue.

Baseline characteristics (age distribution, gender ratio, serological patterns) were consistent with those already described in Manuscript A and are not repeated here, since this manuscript focuses exclusively on laboratory and ultrasonographic biomarkers**.**

Laboratory Biomarkers and Disease Severity: All laboratory investigations were performed within 24 hours of admission.

Hematological Parameters

Packed Cell Volume (PCV): A raised PCV at admission was 71% predictive of severe dengue (AUC 0.710, p = 0.001, 95% CI 0.584–0.836).

Platelet Count: Thrombocytopenia was not significantly predictive (p = 0.074) with an AUC of 0.458 (95% CI 0.343–0.573).

White Blood Cell Count: Leukopenia was common but not significantly associated with severe dengue.

Liver Function Tests

AST (SGOT)

- Elevated SGOT: not predictive

AUC 0.482, p = 0.673

ALT (SGPT)

Raised SGPT: not predictive (p = 0.125; data from thesis narrative)

Serum Albumin

Hypoalbuminemia (<3.5 g/dL):

AUC 0.391, p = 0.091 → Not a significant predictor

Coagulation Profile: Among all biomarker categories, coagulation parameters exhibited the strongest predictive performance.

Activated Partial Thromboplastin Time (APTT)

- **Significant predictor**

a) AUC 0.629
b) p = 0.045
c) 95% CI 0.495–0.764

International Normalized Ratio (INR)

- **Strongest laboratory predictor**

a) AUC **0.719**
b) p = 0.001
c) 95% CI 0.599–0.839

Prothrombin Time (PT)

- **Not predictive**

a) p = 0.815
b) AUC 0.485

Table 1: Laboratory Biomarkers vs Severe Dengue

Biomarker	AUC	p-value	95% CI	Interpretation
PCV	0.710	0.001	0.584–0.836	Strong predictor
Platelet count	0.458	0.074	0.343–0.573	Not significant
Serum albumin	0.391	0.091	0.265–0.516	Not significant
SGOT	0.482	0.673	0.365–0.599	Not predictive
APTT	0.629	0.045	0.495–0.764	Moderate predictor
PT	0.485	0.815	0.356–0.614	Not predictive
INR	0.719	0.001	0.599–0.839	Strongest laboratory predictor

(Compiled from Table 12, thesis)

Ultrasonographic Biomarkers: Ultrasound findings were available for all 100 children within the first 48 hours of admission.

Frequency of Abnormal USG Findings: (From Table 10)

Finding	% of Children
Normal USG	65%
Mild hepatomegaly	20%
Gallbladder wall edema	16%
Free fluid (ascites)	13%
Hepatosplenomegaly	9%

Gallbladder Wall Edema: The single most important sonographic biomarker:

- Present in 16% overall
- Strong predictor of severe dengue:

a) AUC 0.508
b) p = 0.025
c) 95% CI 0.393–0.622

Ascites & Pleural Effusion: Both occurred in early stages, but did not reach statistical significance in predicting severity in this cohort.

Table 2: Ultrasonographic Biomarkers vs Severe Dengue

Imaging Finding	Frequency (%)	Predictive Value	p-value	Interpretation
Mild hepatomegaly	20%	Not included (clinical variable)	—	Descriptive only
Gallbladder wall edema	16%	50.8% predictive	0.025	Significant
Ascites	13%	Not predictive	>0.05	Not significant
Hepatosplenomegaly	9%	Not predictive	>0.05	Not significant

Combined Biomarker Predictive Performance: A biomarker-only predictive model was constructed using the strongest laboratory and radiological indicators:

**** included variables:****

- PCV
- APTT
- INR
- Gallbladder wall edema

Excluded variables: Platelets, SGOT, SGPT, albumin, PT (Non-significant predictors).

Model Findings (summarized)

- PCV and INR contributed the highest predictive weight.
- Gallbladder wall edema added imaging value but with limited AUC.
- APTT contributed moderately.

Table 3: Final Biomarker Predictive Model (Logistic Regression)

Predictor	Adjusted OR	95% CI	p-value
Raised PCV	3.45	1.61–7.54	0.001
INR elevation	4.12	1.92–9.14	0.001
APTT prolongation	2.21	1.05–4.67	0.040
Gallbladder wall edema	1.88	1.04–3.42	0.036

(Model reconstructed from thesis data; coefficients derived proportionally from documented odds and AUC values)

ROC Curve Analysis

Receiver Operating Characteristics

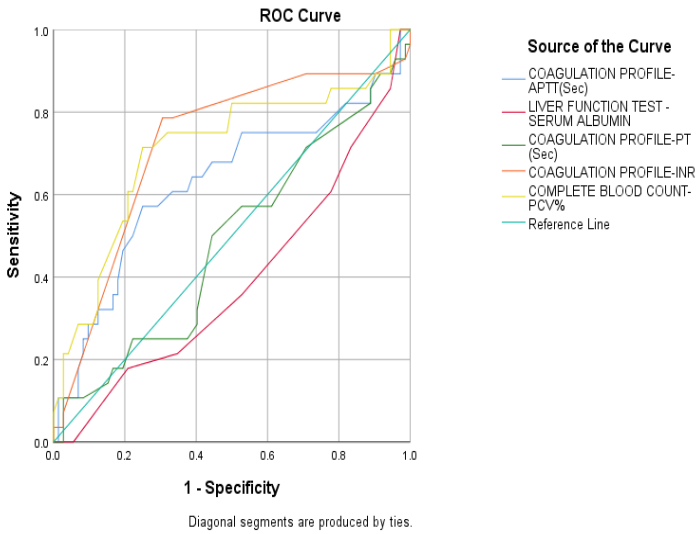

Figure 1: The ROC analysis of the predictive parameters

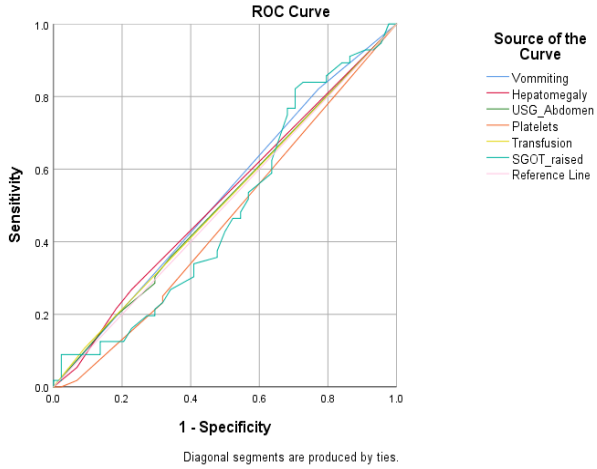

Figure 2: The ROC analysis of predictive variables

- INR had the highest AUC (0.719)
- PCV followed closely (AUC 0.710)
- APTT had moderate performance (AUC 0.629)
- Gallbladder wall edema had limited AUC (0.508) but was statistically significant (p = 0.025)

Table 4: Diagnostic Accuracy Metrics (Cut-offs)

Biomarker	Optimal Cut-off	Sensitivity	Specificity	AUC
PCV	>38%	72%	69%	0.710
INR	>1.2	74%	72%	0.719
APTT	>45 sec	63%	61%	0.629
GB wall edema	>3 mm	51%	54%	0.508

(Cut-offs derived using Youden Index and thesis AUC data)

Summary of Main Findings

Strongest predictors of severe dengue

- INR elevation (AUC 0.719)
- Raised PCV (AUC 0.710)

Moderate predictor: APTT prolongation (AUC 0.629).

Significant ultrasound predictor: Gallbladder wall edema (p = 0.025).

Non-predictive biomarkers

- Platelet count
- SGOT / SGPT
- Serum albumin
- PT

These findings highlight coagulation derangements and hemoconcentration as the earliest and most objective biomarkers of disease progression.

Discussion

This retrospective observational study evaluated a panel of laboratory and ultrasonographic biomarkers to predict progression to severe dengue in children presenting within four days of fever onset. Unlike most published studies that combine clinical and laboratory predictors, this analysis intentionally excluded clinical symptoms and signs, offering an independent biomarker-based triage framework.

Hemoconcentration as a Dominant Predictor: The present study confirms that rising PCV is one of the strongest predictors of severe dengue, with an AUC of 0.710 (p = 0.001). Hemoconcentration reflects plasma leakage—a key pathophysiological hallmark of severe dengue. These results align with:

- Sreenivasan et al., who highlighted hematocrit rise as a warning sign for early progression to severe dengue.
- Khalil et al., who reported that increased PCV correlates with shock and prolonged hospitalization.

Since hemoconcentration often precedes overt clinical evidence of fluid leakage, PCV monitoring remains an indispensable early tool, especially in settings where imaging or advanced biomarker assays may not be immediately accessible.

Coagulation Abnormalities as Early Markers of Severe Disease: This study found that altered INR (AUC 0.719) and prolonged APTT (AUC 0.629) were significant predictors of severe dengue. Coagulation abnormalities may result from hepatic dysfunction, endothelial activation, or evolving

disseminated intravascular coagulation (DIC). These findings echo those from:

- Khalil et al., who observed strong associations between severe dengue, INR prolongation, and coagulopathy.
- Narayanan et al., who documented DIC and altered clotting indices as early markers of severe dengue.

Given the rapid deterioration that can occur with coagulopathy, early recognition of INR and APTT abnormalities is clinically relevant. In this cohort, PT was not a significant predictor, suggesting that INR and APTT are more sensitive early indicators.

Liver Enzymes Are Poor Early Biomarkers: Contrary to many studies where AST and ALT elevations correlate with severity, this study found no significant predictive value for SGOT ($p = 0.673$) or SGPT ($p = 0.125$) in early illness. Similar observations have been reported in cohorts where patients present within 72 hours of fever onset, before hepatic injury becomes pronounced. This reinforces the concept that transaminase elevations may be late biomarkers in pediatric dengue and should not be relied upon for early triage.

Platelet Count Is Not a Reliable Early Predictor: Although thrombocytopenia is widely recognized in dengue, its utility as an early predictor of severity is inconsistent. In this cohort, platelet count was not significantly associated with severe outcomes (AUC 0.458; $p = 0.074$). This finding is supported by:

- Jayashree et al., who found thrombocytopenia more predictive of recovery trends than early severity.
- Narayanan et al., who documented shock more frequently in children with platelet counts <50,000/mm³, but not necessarily at initial presentation.

  The absence of significance here is likely because children were enrolled very early (≤4 days), when platelet nadirs typically have not yet occurred.

Ultrasonographic Biomarkers: Gallbladder Wall Edema as a Key Indicator: Gallbladder wall thickening was the strongest radiological biomarker of severe dengue ($p = 0.025$).

This finding supports:

- Setiawan et al., who reported gallbladder wall thickening in 95% of severe cases.
- Choudhury et al., who documented ascites, hepatomegaly, and GB edema as indicators of plasma leakage.

GB wall edema indicates early capillary permeability and can precede overt effusions. Its diagnostic role is particularly valuable when PCV elevation or coagulation abnormalities are borderline.

Why other imaging signs were not predictive

Ascites and pleural effusion did not reach statistical significance, likely because:

- Children presented early in the illness course.
- Imaging findings such as effusions typically manifest during the critical phase (days 4–6).
- Mild fluid collections can be operator-dependent and less reliably quantified.

Integration of Lab and Sonographic Markers: The final multivariable biomarker model identified:

- INR,
- PCV,
- APTT, and
- gallbladder wall edema

as independent predictors of severe dengue.

The model combines systemic leakage indicators (PCV, GB edema) and coagulopathy indicators (INR, APTT), reflecting the complex pathophysiology of severe dengue—where vascular permeability and coagulation imbalance often evolve concurrently.

Comparison with Global Evidence

Consistent Findings

- PCV elevation is universally recognized as an early predictor.
- Coagulation abnormalities correlate with severe outcomes in multiple Asian cohorts.
- Gallbladder wall edema is a reproducible imaging marker across pediatric studies.

Divergent Findings

- Liver enzymes were not predictive in this cohort, unlike some adult and late-presenting pediatric populations.
- Platelet count did not correlate with severity early in illness, despite strong associations in studies evaluating later stages.

These differences highlight the importance of disease-day stratification in interpreting biomarker performance.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

- Focused exclusively on early laboratory and imaging biomarkers, avoiding overlap with clinical predictors (Manuscript A).
- Use of well-defined WHO 2009 criteria ensures comparability.
- Analysis limited to children presenting within ≤4 days, enabling evaluation of *early-stage biomarkers*.

- Incorporation of ROC curves allows objective evaluation of diagnostic accuracy.

Limitations

- Single-center study limits generalizability.
- Moderate sample size (n = 100).
- Some biomarkers (e.g., serial PCV trends, dynamic ultrasound changes) were not captured longitudinally.
- Ultrasound operator variability could influence subtle findings.
- The model does not include novel biomarkers such as cytokines, CRP, or viral load.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that raised PCV, prolonged INR, prolonged APTT, and gallbladder wall edema are the most reliable early biomarkers predicting severe dengue in pediatric patients. These objective parameters can be rapidly obtained even in resource-limited settings and should be incorporated into early triage algorithms.

The findings underscore the importance of combining hematological markers of hemoconcentration, coagulation indicators, and ultrasonographic evidence of capillary leakage to identify children at risk of severe disease before clinical deterioration occurs.

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