

# Neutrophil-to-Lymphocyte Ratio (NLR) as a Predictor of Acute Rejection in Pediatric Kidney Transplant Recipients

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**Ethics Approval:** This study was Approval granted by the Institutional Review Board / Ethical Committee of Minia University (ID: 251/10/2021)

**Conflict-of-interest statement:** All authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

**Funding:** This research has not received grants from any public, commercial or not-for profit agency.

## Abstract

**Background:** Pediatric kidney transplantation is the definitive therapeutic intervention for children suffering from end-stage kidney disease (ESKD). Despite significant improvements in surgical protocols and maintenance immunosuppression, acute allograft rejection remains a primary driver of graft loss and long-term recipient morbidity. Traditional monitoring tools, such as raw serum creatinine and calculated estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR), exhibit poor sensitivity for early subclinical immune activation, often rising only after irreversible histological injury has occurred.

**Objective:** This study aimed to comprehensively evaluate the predictive utility of the neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio (NLR) as a non-invasive, easily accessible biomarker for identifying acute allograft rejection in pediatric kidney transplant recipients.

**Methods:** A specialized case-control study was conducted at the Kidney Transplantation Unit and Transplantation Clinic of Cairo University Children's Hospital (CUCH). The study enrolled 70 pediatric living-donor kidney transplant recipients were recruited.

**Results:** Intergroup analysis demonstrated a statistically significant elevation in the mean NLR of the acute rejection cohort (Group I) compared to the stable control cohort (Group II) ( $2.7 \pm 1.8$  vs.  $2.05 \pm 0.76$ ;  $p = 0.034$ ). Furthermore, longitudinal tracking within Group I revealed a sharp, highly significant spike in NLR from the last stable outpatient clinic visit to the acute day of rejection presentation ( $1.6 \pm 0.69$  vs.  $2.7 \pm 1.8$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve analysis confirmed that the NLR possesses acceptable diagnostic accuracy for predicting acute allograft rejection episodes (Area Under the Curve [AUC] = 0.696;  $p = 0.037$ ).

**Conclusion:** The neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio could serve as a dynamic, non-invasive, cost-effective, and readily accessible hematological biomarker that reflects systemic alloimmune activation preceding clinical allograft failure.

**Keywords:** Pediatric kidney transplantation; Acute allograft rejection; Neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio (NLR); Biomarker; Graft dysfunction; Alloimmune activation; Non-invasive monitoring; Pediatric recipients

**How to cite this article:** Ahmed Hamdy Hassan Ahmed 1; Mostafa Ahmed El Foly 1; Fatina Fadel 2; Mohamed Hashim Mahgoob 1; Yasmine Taha El Shiwy 3; Doaa M. salah 2; Salwa hussein swelam1. Neutrophil-to-Lymphocyte Ratio (NLR) as a Predictor of Acute Rejection in Pediatric Kidney Transplant Recipients. *Int J Drug Deliv Technol.* 2026;16(85s):739-744. DOI: 10.25258/ijddt.16.85s.73.

## Introduction

elevated NLR has been associated with acute rejection episodes and may serve as an easily accessible adjunctive biomarker for early detection. Given the limitations of current monitoring tools, NLR holds promise as a practical, non-invasive, and cost-effective parameter that can be integrated into routine post-transplant surveillance. Serial NLR measurements may facilitate the timely identification of subclinical alloimmune activation, enabling earlier intervention and potentially improving long-term graft outcomes in pediatric kidney transplant recipients.

## Patients and Methods

Kidney transplantation is the optimal treatment for pediatric end-stage kidney disease, offering superior survival, growth, and quality of life compared with dialysis. However, acute allograft rejection remains a major cause of morbidity and graft loss in children, and serum creatinine-based monitoring is limited by its delayed rise after significant nephron injury. The neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio (NLR) has emerged as a simple, inexpensive marker of systemic inflammation, with meta-analyses confirming significantly higher NLR values in kidney transplant recipients experiencing acute rejection. In pediatric cohorts specifically,

antigen (HLA) mismatches. Immunosuppression parameters included the specific type of induction therapy utilized, such as interleukin-2 receptor antagonists or anti-thymocyte globulin, maintenance dosage logs, and objective patient compliance/adherence scores. Physical examination included current body weight (kg), height (cm), body mass index (BMI, kg/m<sup>2</sup>), and standardized blood pressure measurements adjusted for age and gender percentiles.

Peripheral blood samples were collected via sterile venipuncture under strict aseptic conditions at predefined intervals. For Group I, samples were drawn on the day of application to the clinic due to acute rejection symptoms, as well as retroactively reviewed from their last stable outpatient clinic visit. For Group II, samples were obtained during their scheduled routine follow-up visits. Kidney function testing included basal serum creatinine levels and creatinine concentrations at the time of suspected rejection, determined using the SELECTRA PRO XL auto-analyzer (ELITech Group Clinical Chemistry Automation Systems, Netherlands). The corresponding estimated glomerular filtration rate (eGFR) was calculated using the standardized pediatric Schwartz Formula:  $eGFR (mL/min/1.73m^2) = [k \times \text{Height (cm)}] / \text{Serum Creatinine (mg/dL)}$ , where  $k = 0.413$  for children and adolescents. Hematological profiles and NLR derivation involved complete blood count (CBC) parameters along with full leukocyte differential analyses performed using the CelltacES Automated Hematology Analyser (Nihon Kohden Corporation, Japan). To maintain quality control and eliminate automated reporting artifacts, all differential leukocytic percentages were manually validated via light microscopic examination of Leishman-stained peripheral blood thin films by an experienced clinical pathologist. The NLR was mathematically derived using the formula:  $NLR = \text{Absolute Neutrophil Count (cells/}\mu\text{L)} / \text{Absolute Lymphocyte Count (cells/}\mu\text{L)}$ .

Percutaneous ultrasound-guided core needle biopsies of the kidney allograft were performed on all patients in Group I presenting with clinical signs of graft dysfunction, defined as an unexplained  $\geq 20\%$  rise in serum creatinine above baseline value. Biopsy cores were processed, sectioned, stained with hematoxylin-eosin, periodic acid-Schiff, and Masson's trichrome, and examined by a dedicated kidney pathologist. Biopsies were interpreted according to the international Banff classification criteria to document specific

## 1. Study Setting and Design

This prospective-style case-control study was conducted over an extended clinical timeframe at the Kidney Transplantation Unit and specialized Outpatient Transplantation Clinic of Cairo University Children's Hospital (CUCH).

## 2. Patient Selection and Group Allocation

A total of 70 pediatric kidney transplant recipients who fulfilled the study's predefined eligibility criteria were enrolled. The study cohort was divided into two equal groups based on clinical and histological evaluations. Group I (Rejection Group,  $n = 35$ ) comprised 35 pediatric recipients who developed biopsy-proven acute allograft rejection, including acute cellular rejection, antibody-mediated rejection, or acute-on-chronic rejection episodes, during the study period. Group II (Control Group,  $n = 35$ ) comprised 35 age- and sex-matched pediatric recipients who maintained stable allograft function with no documented episodes of rejection or significant serum creatinine fluctuations for a minimum of three consecutive months prior to enrollment.

The eligibility criteria included pediatric recipients aged between 1 and 18 years at the time of enrollment; recipients of a primary living-donor kidney transplant; patients maintained on a standard triple immunosuppressive drug regimen consisting of a calcineurin inhibitor (tacrolimus), an antiproliferative agent (mycophenolate mofetil [MMF]), and maintenance corticosteroids (prednisolone); and histologically confirmed, biopsy-proven acute rejection for all members assigned to Group I. Exclusion criteria were patients receiving cyclosporine-based immunosuppression regimens; patients presenting with active, clinically overt bacterial, viral, or fungal infections, or severe clinical dehydration, as these states independently alter hematological ratios; and recipients of multiorgan transplantations, such as combined liver-kidney transplants.

A comprehensive clinical history and physical examination were compiled for each participant. The baseline variables recorded included demographic data such as the age of the patient, sex, and relationship to the living donor (related vs. unrelated), along with donor age. Transplant characteristics included the primary cause of ESKD (original kidney disease), preemptive transplantation status, type and duration of pre-transplant dialysis modality (hemodialysis vs. peritoneal dialysis), the exact time elapsed between the transplant procedure and the onset of the rejection episode, pre-transplant hepatitis C virus (HCV) serostatus, and the number of human leukocyte

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| Variable                                                   | Group I<br>(n=35)<br>Rejecti<br>on | Group II<br>(n=35)<br>non-<br>Rejecti<br>on | P<br>valu<br>e |
|------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------|
| <b>Age (in<br/>years)</b>                                  | 15.2 ±                             | 16.9 ±                                      | 0.522          |
| Mean ±                                                     | 4.6                                | 4.7                                         |                |
| SD                                                         |                                    |                                             |                |
| <b>Sex</b>                                                 | 23<br>(66%)                        | 21<br>(60%)                                 | 0.560          |
| Male                                                       | 12                                 | 14                                          |                |
| Female                                                     | (34%)                              | (40%)                                       |                |
| <b>Original<br/>kidney<br/>disease</b>                     |                                    |                                             |                |
| Unknown                                                    | 9<br>(26%)                         | 25<br>(71%)                                 | 0.590          |
| Obstructi<br>ve<br>uropathy                                | 10<br>(28%)                        | 5<br>(14%)                                  |                |
| Inherited<br>nephropa<br>thy                               | 16<br>(46%)                        | 5<br>(14%)                                  |                |
| <b>Post TX<br/>follow<br/>up<br/>duration<br/>(months)</b> |                                    |                                             |                |

pathologies, including T-cell-mediated rejection (TCMR), antibody-mediated rejection (ABMR), acute tubular injury (ATI), interstitial fibrosis and tubular atrophy (IFTA), and thrombotic microangiopathy (TMA).

## 3. Ethical Framework

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. The study protocol received formal approval from the Institutional Review Boards and Research Ethics Committees of the Faculty of Medicine at Cairo University and Minia University. Administrative permissions were obtained from the hospital directors to access medical records and laboratory databases. A comprehensive, written informed consent form was obtained from the parents or legal guardians of all participating children after a thorough explanation of the study objectives, risk-benefit ratios, and their right to voluntary withdrawal.

## 4. Data Analysis

The collected clinical, laboratory, and histopathological data were revised for completeness, coded, and statistically analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) (Wagner III, 2019). Quantitative variables (NLR) were tested for normality using the Shapiro–Wilk test; normally distributed data were presented as mean ± standard deviation (SD), while non-parametric data were expressed as median and interquartile range (IQR). The following tests were applied as appropriate: independent samples t-test for parametric quantitative variables, Mann–Whitney U test for non-parametric quantitative variables, Chi-square test for categorical variables, and Fisher's exact test when the expected frequency in any cell was <5. For diagnostic performance analysis, Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve analysis was performed to determine the predictive ability of tacrolimus levels and NLR for identifying biopsy-proven acute rejection, and the area under the curve (AUC), sensitivity, specificity, and optimal cut-off values were calculated, with AUC values interpreted as 0.7–0.8 acceptable, 0.8–0.9 excellent, and >0.9 outstanding. Statistical significance was determined using a two-tailed p-value with a confidence interval of 95%, interpreted as p > 0.05 not significant (NS) and p < 0.05 significant (S).

## Results

### Table 1: Comprehensive Comparison of Sociodemographic of Transplant-Related Characteristics Between the Studied Groups

The table presents a comparative analysis of demographic variables between Group I (Rejection Group, n = 35) and Group II (Non-Rejection Control Group, n = 35) among pediatric kidney transplant recipients. The two groups were comparable with no statistically significant differences in age, sex, original kidney disease, number of HLA mismatches, or donor relationship (all  $p > 0.05$ ).

## 2. Intergroup NLR Analysis (Group I vs. Group II)

Comparative analysis of baseline inflammatory biomarkers revealed a statistically significant increase in the NLR of pediatric patients experiencing biopsy-proven acute allograft rejection compared to stable controls. The mean NLR for Group I at the time of rejection clinical presentation was  $2.7 \pm 1.8$ , with a calculated median value of 2.5 (IQR: 1.8–3.33). In comparison, the stable transplant recipients in Group II demonstrated a mean NLR of  $2.05 \pm 0.76$  and a median value of 2.2 (IQR: 1.1–2.78). This difference between the two cohorts was statistically significant ( $p = 0.034$ ), as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Neutrophil-to-Lymphocyte Ratio (NLR) Comparison Between the Studied Groups**

| Variable Parameters | Group I (Rejection Cohort) (n = 35) | Group II (Stable Control Cohort) (n = 35) | P-value       |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------|
| NLR Mean $\pm$ SD   | $2.7 \pm 1.8$                       | $2.05 \pm 0.76$                           | <b>0.034*</b> |
| Median (Q1 – Q3)    | 2.5 (1.8 – 3.33)                    | 2.2 (1.1 – 2.78)                          | —             |

\* $p < 0.05$  indicates statistical significance.

## 2. Longitudinal Tracking of Intragroup NLR Dynamics (Group I)

To assess the dynamic behavior of the NLR prior to clinical symptoms, a longitudinal paired analysis was performed within Group I. This compared the hematological parameters gathered on the day of acute rejection presentation against those obtained during their last stable outpatient clinic follow-up visit.

During their stable follow-up period, the mean NLR of these patients was  $1.6 \pm 0.69$ , with a median of 1.25 (IQR: 1.15–2.4). However, on the day of application to the clinic with acute allograft rejection, the mean NLR rose to  $2.7 \pm 1.8$ , with a median of 2.3 (IQR: 1.8–3.25). This sharp longitudinal increase within the same patient cohort was highly statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ), as presented in Table 2.

**Table 3: Intragroup Longitudinal NLR Trajectory Trends Within Group I**

| Variable               | Group I (n=35) Rejection on | Group II (n=35) non-Rejection on | P value |
|------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|---------|
| Mean $\pm$ SD          | $22 \pm 19.9$               | -                                | -       |
| Median (Q1-Q3)         | 36 (12 - 60)                | -                                | -       |
| Number of HLA mismatch | 2 (5.7%)                    | 4 (11.4%)                        | 0.393   |
| Relation of donor      | 9 (25.7%)                   | 7 (20%)                          | 0.569   |
|                        | 26 (74.3%)                  | 28 (80%)                         |         |

Quantitative data represented as mean, SD, median, interquartile range (Q1-Q3), while qualitative data are represented by number and percentage. Mann Whitney test to compare between two groups; Chi square test used between qualitative groups.  $p$  value  $< 0.05$  was significant.

**Sharma and Gupta (2025)** reported that the neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio (NLR) has emerged as a potential marker of systemic inflammation and immune response. Conversely, a study by **Taner et al. (2023)** reported that although systemic inflammatory markers including NLR were elevated in some pediatric kidney transplant recipients, their predictive value for acute rejection was limited.

This study demonstrated that the change in neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio (NLR) in Group I occurred from the day of application to the clinic due to rejection to the last outpatient clinic visit before rejection. This increase was statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This pattern indicates that NLR may reflect dynamic immunological changes preceding acute graft rejection. **Kolonko et al. (2022)** and **Naranjo et al. (2018)** demonstrated that NLR is a strong, non-invasive predictor of acute cellular rejection, showing marked differences in patients with and without rejection episodes.

In the present study, NLR was significantly associated with rejection ( $p = .037$ ), with an AUC of 0.696. **Halazun et al. (2014)** agree with our study that elevated NLR reflects activation of innate immunity and systemic inflammation, both of which are implicated in acute allograft rejection. Previous studies have demonstrated that transplant recipients experiencing acute rejection exhibit significantly higher NLR values than stable recipients, supporting the utility of NLR as a simple and inexpensive biomarker of alloimmune activation. **Forget et al. (2017)** are against our study, as they reported that despite its significance, NLR lacks specificity because it may increase in various inflammatory states unrelated to rejection, including infection, surgical stress, corticosteroid exposure, and systemic inflammatory disorders.

### Conclusion

The neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio serves as a dynamic, non-invasive, cost-effective, and readily accessible hematological biomarker that reflects systemic alloimmune activation preceding clinical allograft failure. Serial monitoring of NLR trajectories offers a reliable strategy for the early detection and management of acute rejection in pediatric recipients.

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| Variable Parameter              | Day of Application to Clinic due to Rejection Event | Last Stable Outpatient Clinic Visit Prior to Rejection | P-value  |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|----------|
| <b>NLR</b>                      |                                                     |                                                        |          |
| <b>Mean <math>\pm</math> SD</b> | 2.7 $\pm$ 1.8                                       | 1.6 $\pm$ 0.69                                         | < 0.001* |
| <b>Median (Q1 – Q3)</b>         | 2.3 (1.8 – 3.25)                                    | 1.25 (1.15 – 2.4)                                      | —        |

\* $p < 0.05$  indicates statistical significance.

### 3.3. ROC Curve Diagnostic Performance Analysis

To evaluate the clinical utility of the NLR as a non-invasive screening tool for acute allograft rejection, a Receiver Operating Characteristic (ROC) curve analysis was performed. The calculated **Area Under the Curve (AUC) was 0.696** (95% Confidence Interval,  $p = 0.037$ ). According to standard diagnostic classification metrics, an AUC value approaching 0.70 represents acceptable diagnostic performance, demonstrating that the NLR can help differentiate pediatric allograft rejection from stable post-transplant courses.

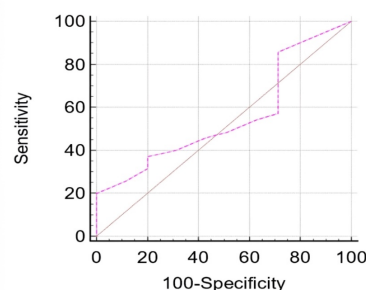


Figure (1) Roc curve NLR cut point for rejection

### Discussion

During allograft rejection, NLR rises due to both innate and adaptive immune responses: acute rejection triggers systemic inflammation, and pro-inflammatory cytokines such as IL-1, IL-6, and TNF- $\alpha$  stimulate the bone marrow to increase neutrophil production and release into circulation. Concurrently, intensified cell-mediated immunity causes lymphocytes to migrate, sequester, and localize into the allograft interstitium, while systemic stress and cortisol induce apoptosis of circulating lymphocytes. The resulting simultaneous increase in neutrophils and decrease in lymphocytes produces a pronounced elevation in NLR (**Smith et al., 2020**).

In the present study, the neutrophil-to-lymphocyte ratio (NLR) was significantly increased in pediatric kidney transplant recipients experiencing rejection more than stable graft function ( $p = 0.038$ ). Similarly,

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