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# ANALYSIS OF PAIN MANAGEMENT AND ASSESSMENT IN HOSPITALIZED NEWBORNS IN NEONATAL INTENSIVE CARE UNITS (NICUs)

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## ABSTRACT

Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) are specialized environments designed to provide critical care to newborns with severe health conditions. However, neonates admitted to these units often undergo numerous painful procedures, which, if not adequately managed, can lead to short- and long-term physiological and neurodevelopmental consequences. Given the limited ability of newborns to verbally express pain, effective assessment

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methods rely on behavioral and physiological indicators. Various validated pain assessment scales have been developed to enhance the accuracy of pain evaluation in this vulnerable population. This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of pain assessment tools in NICU-admitted newborns, highlighting their importance in guiding appropriate pain management strategies. A comprehensive literature review was conducted across major databases, including PubMed, SCIELO, Medline, Lilacs, Cochrane Library, and Google Scholar. Articles published in Portuguese, English, and Spanish between 2013 and 2020 were included, while studies older than ten years were excluded to ensure relevance. The findings emphasize that systematic pain assessment using standardized scales is crucial for minimizing stress and discomfort in neonates, improving overall neonatal care outcomes. Additionally, proper training of healthcare professionals in the use of these tools is essential for optimizing neonatal pain management and ensuring a more humane and individualized approach to patient care. This review underscores the need for increased awareness and implementation of structured pain assessment protocols in NICUs, advocating for multidisciplinary efforts to integrate pain management as a fundamental aspect of neonatal intensive care. Future research should focus on refining existing pain assessment tools and exploring innovative, non-invasive approaches to enhance the quality of care for hospitalized newborns.

**Keywords:** Neonatal Pain. NICU. Pain Assessment. Newborns. Neonatal Care. Pain Management. Intensive Care.

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## INTRODUCTION

Neonatology has undergone significant technological advancements and scientific knowledge dissemination, leading to improved care for newborns admitted to Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs). With the modernization of medical resources and enhanced neonatal care, mortality rates among hospitalized neonates have significantly declined. However, these infants are frequently subjected to numerous invasive procedures, which often result in painful experiences (Santos, Ribeiroll, & Santana, 2014).

Given this context, a crucial question arises: how do neonates respond to painful stimuli? Addressing this question, the present study aims to evaluate pain perception in newborns admitted to NICUs. The specific objectives include: understanding the NICU environment and the clinical and epidemiological profiles of hospitalized neonates, as well as examining the physiology of pain and both behavioral and physiological responses of preterm infants to painful stimuli.

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based methodology, prioritizing in-depth comprehension over numerical representation. Qualitative research, as opposed to the positivist model applied in social studies, does not rely on statistical generalization but rather seeks to explore and understand the intricacies of specific groups, organizations, and phenomena (Goldenberg, 1997). The qualitative approach was chosen to explain underlying factors rather than quantify symbolic exchanges or subject them to empirical validation, as it involves non-metric data analysis and various interpretative methodologies (Portela, 2004).

The findings of this study underscore the importance of systematic pain assessment in NICUs to ensure a more humane and comfortable hospitalization for newborns. Furthermore, adequate training of healthcare professionals in the application of pain assessment scales is essential for optimizing neonatal pain management and enhancing overall care quality. Future research should focus on refining existing pain assessment tools and exploring innovative, non-invasive strategies to further improve neonatal care.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative literature review approach to analyze pain assessment and management in neonates admitted to Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs). The research focused on identifying effective pain assessment methods and emphasizing the importance of standardized pain scales in improving neonatal care.

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## DATA SOURCES AND SEARCH STRATEGY

The literature review was conducted using major scientific databases, including PubMed, SCIELO, Medline, Lilacs, Cochrane Library, and Google Scholar. A systematic search strategy was applied, utilizing relevant Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms and free-text keywords such as "Neonatal Pain," "NICU," "Pain Assessment," "Newborns," "Neonatal Care," and "Pain Management." Boolean operators ("AND" and "OR") were used to refine the search and ensure the inclusion of comprehensive and relevant studies.

The temporal restriction was set between 2013 and 2020, selecting studies published within this period to ensure the review included recent and relevant findings on neonatal pain assessment and management. Articles published in Portuguese, English, and Spanish were considered to provide a broader perspective on the topic.

## INCLUSION CRITERIA

1. Studies discussing pain assessment methods in NICU-admitted newborns, including behavioral and physiological pain scales.
2. Articles analyzing the clinical and epidemiological profiles of neonates in NICUs.
3. Research focusing on the physiological and behavioral responses of preterm infants to painful stimuli.
4. Studies published in peer-reviewed journals and indexed in the selected databases.

## EXCLUSION CRITERIA

1. Studies published before 2013, to ensure the relevance of findings.
2. Research focusing on pain management in pediatric patients outside NICUs.
3. Studies lacking a clear methodology for neonatal pain assessment.
4. Articles not available in Portuguese, English, or Spanish.

## STUDY SELECTION AND DATA EXTRACTION

The initial search yielded a substantial number of articles, which were screened based on their titles and abstracts. After a preliminary review, studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. The remaining articles underwent a full-text review, where studies with robust methodologies and relevant findings were selected for final inclusion.

Key data extracted from the selected studies included:

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Neonatal pain assessment scales used in NICUs.

Impact of pain assessment on clinical care and pain management strategies.

Healthcare professionals' role in neonatal pain assessment and management.

Challenges and limitations in implementing standardized pain evaluation protocols.

RATIONALE FOR STUDY DESIGN

This review emphasizes the critical role of structured pain assessment in NICUs, advocating for improved healthcare professional training and standardized evaluation methods. By synthesizing recent literature, this study provides insights into enhancing pain management strategies and promoting a more humane approach to neonatal intensive care. Future research should focus on refining existing assessment tools and developing non-invasive methodologies to improve neonatal pain evaluation and management.

## RESULTS

CHARACTERIZATION OF NEONATAL INTENSIVE CARE UNITS (NICUS) AND THE CLINICAL AND EPIDEMIOLOGICAL PROFILE OF HOSPITALIZED NEWBORNS

Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) were initially designed to care for premature newborns (NBs), but over the years, their scope has expanded to accommodate neonates with various medical conditions. Advances in technology and scientific research have played a fundamental role in improving neonatal care, with modern equipment such as incubators significantly increasing neonatal survival rates (Arakaki et al., 2017).

The NICU healthcare team consists of neonatologists, physiotherapists, speech therapists, a head nurse, nursing staff, and technicians (Montenegro & Rezende, 2014). The rapid progress in neonatal medicine has led to a substantial reduction in morbidity and mortality among high-risk infants, particularly preterm babies. Neonatology, a specialized branch of pediatrics, focuses on the care of both healthy and critically ill newborns. The introduction of innovative therapies has significantly improved diagnostic and treatment capabilities, reducing neonatal morbidity and mortality (Duarte, 2014).

The neonatal period is defined as the first 28 days of life, a critical phase in which newborns undergo anatomical and physiological adaptations to extrauterine life. Neonates are classified by gestational age, with full-term newborns being those between 37 and 41 weeks of gestation (Oliveira et al., 2015).

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Studies indicate that the primary conditions leading to NICU admission include prematurity, low birth weight, respiratory distress syndrome (RDS), bronchopulmonary dysplasia, seizures, gastroesophageal reflux, and atrial septal defect (Tavares et al., 2014; Martins et al., 2014). Among preterm neonates with low birth weight, the risk of growth and developmental impairments increases as gestational age decreases, contributing to higher neonatal morbidity and mortality rates (Tavares et al., 2014; Martins et al., 2014).

Respiratory distress syndrome (RDS) is one of the most frequent complications in neonates weighing less than 1.5 kg. The limited use of corticosteroids during pregnancy and immediately after birth has been linked to a higher incidence of RDS, increasing the need for mechanical ventilation (Oliveira et al., 2015; Tavares et al., 2014).

Despite continuous improvements in NICU care, preterm newborns—especially those born before 26 weeks of gestation—often require prolonged hospital stays exceeding three months. Their immature nervous systems make them highly susceptible to physiological stress and prolonged hospitalization, increasing the risk of nosocomial infections and mortality (Fernandes & Grave, 2014).

Epidemiological data indicate that morbidity and mortality in NICUs are closely related to socioeconomic factors, maternal health, and prenatal care quality (Oliveira, 2015). Epidemiology plays a crucial role in identifying disease prevalence and risk factors, helping healthcare professionals develop preventive measures to improve neonatal health outcomes.

Studies highlight that premature birth is strongly linked to poor maternal health, inadequate prenatal care, and unfavorable socioeconomic conditions (Lansky et al., 2014). Preventive strategies, such as enhanced prenatal care, infection control, and reduced unnecessary cesarean sections, are essential in mitigating preterm births (Oliveira et al., 2015).

The characteristics of newborns significantly influence NICU admission rates. Key variables include sex, gestational age, birth weight, and length of hospital stay (Tavares et al., 2014). Research indicates that male newborns are hospitalized more frequently, and approximately 70% of NICU admissions involve preterm infants between 24 and 35 weeks of gestation (Martins et al., 2014). Female fetuses have a higher rate of lung maturation, offering them a protective advantage over male neonates (Damian, Waterkemper & Paludo, 2016).

Birth weight is a crucial determinant of neonatal outcomes. Data suggest that 70% of hospitalized neonates have low birth weight (Tavares et al., 2014). Birth weight is directly influenced by maternal nutritional status and overall health, playing a vital role in the infant's

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growth and development. Studies reveal that 96% of low birth weight infants require NICU admission, particularly in developing countries where socioeconomic disparities limit access to quality prenatal care (Krey et al., 2016).

Due to immune system immaturity, preterm neonates face an increased risk of sepsis, as infections frequently originate in the respiratory tract (Oliveira et al., 2015). The length of hospital stay depends on the severity of the neonatal condition, with prematurity and low birth weight being major risk factors for prolonged hospitalization and developmental complications (Oliveira et al., 2015).

## NEONATAL PAIN: PHYSIOLOGY AND BEHAVIORAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO PAINFUL STIMULI

The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) defines pain as an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage (Gatchel, 2014). The neonatal pain response involves chemical, physical, and neurological mechanisms, making pain assessment particularly challenging in this patient population (Ferreira, 2014).

Neonates experience both acute and chronic pain. Acute pain serves a protective function, triggering withdrawal reflexes to prevent further injury, whereas chronic pain lacks biological significance and is considered a disease in itself (Gatchel, 2014).

Nociceptive pain, caused by tissue injury and inflammation, is distinct from neuropathic pain, which results from damage to peripheral or central nerves (Almeida et al., 2016). The presence of sensory receptors in the perioral region as early as 7 weeks of gestation, and their full distribution across the body by 20 weeks, indicates that neonates are capable of experiencing pain even before birth (Zwicker et al., 2014).

Studies confirm that newborns, including preterm infants, have functional pain transmission pathways, allowing them to perceive and respond to painful stimuli. Behavioral responses include crying, facial expressions, and body movements, while physiological reactions involve increased heart rate, respiratory rate, and oxygen consumption (Slater & Cantarella, 2015).

The inadequate management of neonatal pain has been associated with higher mortality rates and long-term neurodevelopmental impairments (Cuenca & Guinsburg, 2014). Therefore, systematic pain assessment and appropriate analgesic interventions are essential for optimizing neonatal outcomes.

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PAIN ASSESSMENT IN HOSPITALIZED NEWBORNS IN NICUS

Neonates in NICUs undergo numerous painful procedures daily, necessitating robust pain management strategies (Guinsburg, 2014). Recent advances have led to the validation of multidimensional pain assessment scales, which facilitate standardized evaluation and comparison across studies.

The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) has recognized pain as the "fifth vital sign", emphasizing its routine assessment and management in clinical settings (Lynch, 2015). Neonatal pain assessment tools typically integrate behavioral and physiological indicators, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation (Gibbins et al., 2014).

Among the 40+ neonatal pain assessment scales, the most widely used include:

Behavioral Indicators of Infant Pain (BIIP): Evaluates movement and alertness, with scores ≥5 indicating pain (Balda & Guinsburg, 2018).

Neonatal Infant Pain Scale (NIPS): Incorporates five behavioral and one physiological parameter, categorizing pain levels from mild (1-2) to severe (6-7) (Balda & Guinsburg, 2018).

*Échelle Douleur Inconfort Nouveau-Né* (EDIN): Designed for persistent pain evaluation, with scores >6 warranting analgesic intervention (Balda & Guinsburg, 2018).

Although various unidimensional and multidimensional scales exist, no single tool has been universally accepted for all clinical scenarios. Technological advancements, such as heart rate variability, skin conductance, cerebral activity monitoring, and stress biomarkers, are emerging as promising objective alternatives for neonatal pain assessment (Witt et al., 2016).

Despite the availability of validated pain assessment tools, the lack of standardized training among healthcare professionals—particularly physiotherapists—remains a challenge, highlighting the need for improved education and protocol implementation (Stevens et al., 2014).

## DISCUSSION

THE IMPORTANCE OF NICUS IN NEONATAL CARE AND CHALLENGES IN MANAGING HIGH-RISK NEWBORNS

Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs) have played a fundamental role in improving neonatal survival, especially for premature and critically ill newborns. The significant decline in neonatal morbidity and mortality observed in recent decades is largely attributed to

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advancements in neonatal medicine, improved prenatal care, and the development of specialized equipment (Arakaki et al., 2017). However, despite these advances, neonates admitted to NICUs remain vulnerable to complications associated with prematurity, low birth weight, and respiratory distress syndrome (RDS) (Oliveira et al., 2015).

The reviewed studies confirm that prematurity remains the leading cause of NICU admissions, with newborns born before 26 weeks of gestation requiring prolonged hospitalization and facing an increased risk of neurological, respiratory, and immune-related complications (Fernandes & Grave, 2014). Additionally, male newborns are at a higher risk of hospitalization due to their delayed pulmonary maturation, reinforcing the need for sex-specific approaches in neonatal care (Damian, Waterkemper & Paludo, 2016).

One of the major challenges in NICU management is the long-term hospitalization of preterm infants, which increases their susceptibility to infections and other complications. The findings indicate that low birth weight and immune system immaturity are the primary risk factors for sepsis and prolonged ventilation dependency (Oliveira et al., 2015). These factors highlight the importance of infection control protocols, early nutritional support, and continuous monitoring of hospitalized neonates.

## NEONATAL PAIN: RECOGNITION, PHYSIOLOGICAL IMPACT, AND MANAGEMENT CHALLENGES

Pain management in neonates remains a critical and often overlooked aspect of neonatal intensive care. Historically, newborns were believed to have an underdeveloped nervous system, making them less sensitive to pain. However, extensive research now confirms that neonates, including preterm infants, not only perceive pain but also exhibit heightened sensitivity due to an immature pain modulation system (Slater & Cantarella, 2015).

Physiological and behavioral responses to pain, such as increased heart rate, respiratory changes, facial expressions, and crying, provide essential indicators for pain assessment (Zwicker et al., 2014). The studies reviewed highlight that pain perception begins early in fetal development, with sensory receptors fully distributed across the body by 20 weeks of gestation, reinforcing the necessity of early pain management interventions (William & Lascelles, 2020).

Unmanaged neonatal pain has been linked to adverse neurodevelopmental outcomes, prolonged hospital stays, and increased mortality rates (Cuenca & Guinsburg, 2014). Painful

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experiences during the neonatal period can lead to long-term alterations in stress response mechanisms, cognitive function, and emotional regulation, further emphasizing the need for systematic pain assessment and intervention strategies (Gatchel, 2014).

## NEONATAL PAIN ASSESSMENT: STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF CURRENT TOOLS

Pain assessment in neonates remains challenging due to their inability to verbally communicate discomfort. The Neonatal Infant Pain Scale (NIPS), Behavioral Indicators of Infant Pain (BIIP), and *Échelle Douleur Inconfort Nouveau-Né* (EDIN) have been widely utilized, providing structured frameworks for evaluating behavioral and physiological pain responses (Balda & Guinsburg, 2018). However, these scales have limitations, as they rely on subjective observations that can vary among healthcare providers.

Although multidimensional pain assessment tools offer improved accuracy, no single scale has been universally validated for all clinical scenarios (Witt et al., 2016). Additionally, the lack of standardized training among healthcare professionals further complicates the consistent application of these tools, particularly among physiotherapists and nursing staff (Stevens et al., 2014).

Recent advances in objective pain assessment methods, such as heart rate variability, skin conductance monitoring, cerebral activity assessment via electroencephalography (EEG), and stress biomarkers (e.g., cortisol levels), offer promising alternatives to traditional behavioral scales (Witt et al., 2016). These technological innovations provide a more precise and quantifiable approach to neonatal pain evaluation, potentially reducing subjectivity in assessment. However, their high cost and limited availability in many NICUs remain significant barriers to widespread implementation.

## THE ROLE OF HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS IN NEONATAL PAIN MANAGEMENT

Effective neonatal pain management requires a multidisciplinary approach, with neonatologists, nurses, and physiotherapists playing a central role in pain recognition, assessment, and intervention (Guinsburg, 2014). Despite the increasing awareness of neonatal pain, studies indicate that many healthcare professionals receive insufficient training in neonatal pain assessment and management (Stevens et al., 2014).

The Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) has emphasized the need for pain to be considered the “fifth vital sign,” requiring routine evaluation and documentation (Lynch, 2015). However, pain assessment remains

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inconsistently integrated into NICU protocols, with significant variability in the frequency of pain evaluations and the use of analgesic interventions (Gibbins et al., 2014).

Pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions play essential roles in neonatal pain relief. While opioids and sedatives are commonly used for pain management in critically ill newborns, their potential for respiratory depression and long-term neurodevelopmental effects raises concerns regarding their safety (Cuenca & Guinsburg, 2014). Non-pharmacological strategies, including skin-to-skin contact, breastfeeding, sucrose administration, and facilitated tucking, have been shown to effectively reduce neonatal pain and stress responses (Slater & Cantarella, 2015).

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN NEONATAL PAIN ASSESSMENT AND MANAGEMENT

The findings of this review highlight the urgent need for standardized, evidence-based pain management protocols in NICUs. Future research should focus on:

1. Developing and validating more objective pain assessment tools, integrating biomarkers and neurophysiological indicators to enhance accuracy and reliability.
2. Expanding healthcare professional training programs to improve the consistency of pain assessment and ensure that all NICU staff are proficient in neonatal pain management.
3. Promoting non-pharmacological interventions as first-line pain relief measures to minimize the risks associated with opioid use.
4. Enhancing neonatal pain management policies, ensuring that pain assessment is incorporated as a mandatory component of neonatal care protocols.

## CONCLUSION

Neonatal pain is a clinically significant and ethically important issue, yet its management remains suboptimal in many NICUs. Despite the availability of validated pain assessment scales, inconsistencies in their application, the subjective nature of behavioral indicators, and the lack of standardized training limit their effectiveness. Emerging technological advancements in neonatal pain assessment hold promise for more accurate and objective evaluation methods, though accessibility remains a challenge.

Healthcare professionals play a crucial role in ensuring adequate neonatal pain management, and efforts should be made to integrate routine pain assessment into standard NICU protocols. By combining technological innovations, structured pain assessment tools,

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and enhanced healthcare professional training, NICUs can significantly improve the quality of life and long-term outcomes of hospitalized neonates.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical importance of neonatal pain assessment and management, particularly in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs), where hospitalized newborns frequently undergo painful procedures. The findings emphasize that neonatal pain must be assessed through a multidimensional approach, considering physiological, hormonal, and behavioral changes in response to painful stimuli. Proper pain assessment is essential to ensuring that neonates receive adequate pain relief and humane care during their hospitalization.

The effective evaluation of neonatal pain requires standardized protocols, including detailed documentation of pain assessment scales and treatment recommendations for common painful procedures in NICUs. The presence of well-defined guidelines is fundamental in promoting consistent pain management strategies across healthcare teams and minimizing the risks associated with inadequate pain control.

One of the main challenges in neonatal pain management is the reliance on healthcare professionals' interpretation of pain signals, which can be subjective and vary based on individual experience and training. This highlights the need for continuous education and specialized training for NICU staff, ensuring that all professionals are equipped to recognize, assess, and manage neonatal pain effectively.

Furthermore, the importance of caregiver involvement in neonatal pain assessment cannot be overlooked. The ability of an adult caregiver to interpret and respond to an infant's pain cues depends on their knowledge, sensitivity, and attentiveness to the signs of distress. Establishing effective communication between caregivers and newborns is essential for ensuring that necessary medical procedures are performed with minimal pain and long-term consequences.

Despite advancements in neonatal pain assessment tools and management strategies, further research is needed to refine objective pain measurement techniques and develop innovative, evidence-based treatment protocols. Future studies should explore non-invasive, technology-driven pain assessment methods and the long-term impact of neonatal pain on neurodevelopmental outcomes. Additionally, efforts should be made to implement

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comprehensive pain management policies that integrate both pharmacological and non-pharmacological approaches tailored to the unique needs of neonates.

In conclusion, neonatal pain management should be prioritized as a fundamental aspect of intensive care, requiring systematic assessment, standardized treatment protocols, and ongoing professional training. By addressing these challenges, healthcare providers can significantly improve the quality of life and clinical outcomes of hospitalized newborns, reducing the potential long-term effects of repeated painful stimuli during the critical neonatal period.

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