



## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Labor Status at Delivery and Lung Function in Extremely Prematurely Born Young Adults

Sean Armstrong<sup>1</sup> | Christopher Harris<sup>1</sup> | Mohadeseh Kazemi<sup>2</sup> | Alan Lunt<sup>3</sup> | Janet Peacock<sup>2</sup> | Anne Greenough<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Neonatal Intensive Care Centre, King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, London, UK | <sup>2</sup>Department of Epidemiology, Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, USA | <sup>3</sup>Women and Children's Health, School of Life Course Sciences, Faculty of Life Sciences and Medicine, King's College London, London, UK

**Correspondence:** Anne Greenough ([anne.greenough@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:anne.greenough@kcl.ac.uk))

**Received:** 6 June 2024 | **Revised:** 4 November 2024 | **Accepted:** 1 December 2024

**Funding:** The Lochlan and Greer Foundation; BlackRock UK; NIHR Biomedical Research Centre based at Guy's and St Thomas NHS Foundation Trust and King's College London.

**Keywords:** infant | lung function | newborn | prematurity | young adults

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** There has been conflicting evidence regarding the impact of mode of delivery on respiratory outcomes in later childhood and adulthood. It is possible labor status, rather than mode of delivery, influences later respiratory morbidity. We hypothesized that extremely premature infants born to mothers in labor would have better lung function at follow-up than those born to mothers not in labor.

**Methods:** We reviewed data from the United Kingdom High-Frequency Oscillation Study. Lung function testing was performed on young people aged 16–18 years born before 29 weeks of gestation. Linear mixed models were used to adjust lung function for maternal and neonatal factors and for the clustering due to multiple births.

**Results:** One hundred and fifty subjects underwent lung function testing. Young adults born to mothers in labor had better mean Forced Expiratory Flow<sub>75</sub> (FEF<sub>75</sub>) compared to those born to mothers not in labor (adjusted difference 0.50 [95% CI: 0.02, 0.99]). Similar significant differences were noted in FEF<sub>50</sub> (0.45 [−0.05, 0.85]), and FEF<sub>25-75</sub> (0.53 [0.05, 1.01]).

**Conclusion:** Our study demonstrates that amongst individuals born very prematurely, those whose mothers were in labor before delivery had better small airway function at 16–19 years of age.

## 1 | Introduction

During labor, infants undergo a series of physiological adaptations for postnatal life—a process which may be impaired in infants delivered by elective cesarean section (CS) [1, 2]. There are significant differences in hormone levels between infants born following labor compared to those born to mothers not in labor—reduced levels of neuroendocrine hormones have been shown in infants born by CS [3, 4]. Newborn levels of maternal hormones (e.g., progesterone) fall faster in infants born following maternal labor compared to in those delivered by CS [5]. Those changes, following CS delivery, may alter the HPA

axis in newborns—as evidenced by increased pain responses in the newborn period [6]. Vaginal deliveries are associated with higher levels of immunological activation compared to CS deliveries [7]. This may be facilitated by exposure to maternal microorganisms—with immune activation by the microbiome response—during labor and vaginal delivery [8, 9]. Studies have demonstrated that infants born by cesarean section have increased rates of respiratory complications in the immediate neonatal period [10]. It has been suggested that infants born after maternal labor establish an FRC earlier and thus may have better neonatal lung function than infants born to mothers not in labor [11]. Early studies suggested a link between cesarean

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2024 The Author(s). *Pediatric Pulmonology* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.

section at term and wheeze or asthma symptoms in later childhood [12–14]. Other studies have failed to show any significant correlation [15–21]. None of these studies, however, examined the labor status of these women, and only two studies have analyzed emergency and elective cesarean sections separately [20, 21]. One study showed no difference in zFEV<sub>1</sub> scores in school-going children born by elective cesarean section or vaginal delivery ( $p = 0.8$ ) [20]. Another study found a significant difference in the percentage of 3 year olds born by emergency versus elective cesarean section who had an active wheeze (4.79% vs. 3.45%,  $p = 0.044$ ) [21]. Furthermore, all of the studies focused on term infants; three studies included a small number of late preterm infants, without analyzing them separately [15, 16, 21]. In a prospective cohort study of 6128 children, the effect of elective and emergency cesarean section with wheezing outcomes were similar, but only elective cesarean section was associated with a higher fractional exhaled nitric oxide (FeNO) level, suggesting increased airway inflammation [22]. It is possible that the inclusion of mothers who were in labor in any cesarean section group may confound efforts to establish causal links to childhood respiratory morbidities.

Children and young adults born preterm have poorer lung function compared to term controls [23, 24]. This effect persists into adulthood [25]. There is a paucity of research determining whether maternal labor status affects long-term respiratory outcomes in prematurely born infants. The aim of this study then was to determine whether mode of delivery or if the mother was in labor before delivery affected lung function in young adults born extremely prematurely. We hypothesized that lung function in young adults born prematurely to mothers who were in labor would be significantly better than in young adults born prematurely to mothers who were not in labor.

## 2 | Materials and Methods

Young people who had been recruited into the United Kingdom Oscillation Study (UKOS) were invited to King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust to undergo lung function and exercise testing and to complete a health questionnaire when they were aged between 16 and 19 years of age [26]. Participants gave written consent to participate in the study, and their parents had previously given written consent to participation in the UKOS trial. Ethical approval for UKOS was granted by the Thames Multicentre Research Ethics Committee [27] and for the follow-up study by the North-East-Tyne & Wear South Research Ethics Committee (16/NE/0314).

Participants underwent respiratory testing in accordance with American Thoracic Society and European Respiratory Society standards [28–32]. Spirometry was used to measure Forced Expiratory Flow at 75% (FEF<sub>75</sub>), Forced Expiratory Flow at 50% (FEF<sub>50</sub>), Forced Expiratory Flow at 25% (FEF<sub>25</sub>), Forced Expiratory Flow at 25%–75% (FEF<sub>25-75</sub>), Forced Vital Capacity (FVC), and Peak Expiratory Flow (PEF). Plethysmography measurements of Functional Residual Capacity (FRC<sub>PLETH</sub>), Total Lung Capacity (TLC<sub>PLETH</sub>), and Residual Volume (RV<sub>PLETH</sub>) were made. In addition, Functional Residual Capacity (FRC<sub>He</sub>) by helium dilution, impulse oscillometry at 5 Hz and 20 Hz,

Diffusion Capacity of Carbon Monoxide (DLCO, DLCO/VA) and Lung Clearance Index (LCI) were assessed.

Spirometry, plethysmography, impulse oscillometry, DLCO, and FRC by helium dilution were measured using Vyair lung function equipment. Lung clearance index was assessed using the SF<sub>6</sub> (Innocor) multi-breath washout technique. This closed-circuit technique uses 0.2% Sulfur Hexafluoride and is felt to be more advantageous over traditional N<sub>2</sub> testing as there is no back-wash into the lungs [33]. The wash-in/wash-out maneuvers can be performed at any time in the breathing cycle. Recently, reference ranges for SF<sub>6</sub> LCI testing have been made available [34]. Lung function results were converted to z-scores using Global Lung Initiative (GLI) reference equations or appropriate reference equations for those lung measurements not included in the GLI reference equations [35–38]. A shuttle sprint test was used to assess exercise capacity [39]. Multi-level Shuttle Runs have been established as a standard of Cardiopulmonary Exercise Testing (CPET) in child- and adulthood [40, 41].

Participants completed a questionnaire regarding their respiratory symptoms, whether they had a current diagnosis of asthma and how much exercise they undertook on a weekly basis. Smoking status of the participants was recorded as “yes” if either they were a self-reported smoker or had a salivary cotinine level greater than 15 ng/mL. Puberty was previously assessed when the participants were 11–14 years of age. More than 90% of children were found to be of Tanner stage 2.

FEF<sub>75</sub> was the primary outcome of this study to remain consistent with the primary outcome of other studies of this cohort [42]. Small airway changes seen in respiratory disease are reflected by increases in airway (< 2 mm) resistance and a reduction in flow seen in the terminal portion of the spirogram [43, 44]. This can be demonstrated either through FEF<sub>75</sub> or FEF<sub>25-75</sub> testing [45]. Demographic factors, lung function, exercise and respiratory symptoms were assessed for statistical significance first by delivery mode, and then by maternal labor status, using mixed models to adjust for the nonindependence of multiple births [46] (continuous data) or logistic regression with a robust standard error [47] (binary outcomes). The effects of delivery mode and maternal labor on lung function were analyzed using a similar mixed model approach but including the following confounders: maternal smoking in pregnancy, gestational age at birth, birthweight z-score, administration of surfactant (yes/no), and participant age at lung function assessment. Analysis of binary outcomes (symptoms/medication) used logistic regression with a robust standard error and adjusted for birthweight z-score. Analysis was performed using Stata v 18 and R.

## 3 | Results

One hundred and fifty UKOS participants returned for lung function testing at 16–19 years. The participants who were assessed at age 16–19 years had a higher mean birthweight and gestational age and their mothers were more likely to be white and not to have smoked in pregnancy compared to the whole UKOS cohort. They were also more likely to have had a major cranial ultrasound abnormality and a pulmonary hemorrhage (Table S1).

There were significant differences in mean birthweight, birthweight z-score, gestational age, and maternal smoking status between those born by vaginal delivery and those born by Cesarean Section (Table 1). There were statistically significant differences in birthweight, birthweight z-score, gestational age,

and maternal smoking in pregnancy between those born after maternal labor compared to those whose mothers were not in labor (Table 2). Most lung function results were not statistically different between infants born by vaginal delivery or cesarean section, except FEF<sub>75</sub> (Table 3).

**TABLE 1** | Demographics by type of delivery.

|                               | Vaginal delivery | Cesarean     | P value |
|-------------------------------|------------------|--------------|---------|
| <b>Number</b>                 | <b>66</b>        | <b>84</b>    |         |
| Female                        | 36 (55%)         | 44 (52%)     | 0.790   |
| Birthweight (gram)            | 919 (225)        | 889 (214)    | 0.280   |
| Birthweight z-score           | -0.13 (0.79)     | -0.93 (1.02) | < 0.001 |
| Gestational Age (weeks)       | 26.4 (1.5)       | 27.3 (1.2)   | < 0.001 |
| Antenatal Corticosteroids     | 59 (89%)         | 76 (92%)     | 0.650   |
| Maternal Smoking in Pregnancy | 17 (28%)         | 11 (14%)     | 0.036   |
| Singleton Delivery            | 57 (86%)         | 66 (79%)     | 0.220   |
| Surfactant                    | 66 (100%)        | 79 (94%)     | 0.067   |
| Supplementary Oxygen at 36wks | 41 (62%)         | 37 (44%)     | 0.033   |
| Postnatal corticosteroids     | 18 (27%)         | 23 (27%)     | 0.990   |
| HFOV                          | 37 (56%)         | 40 (48%)     | 0.310   |
| Age at testing (years)        | 17.9 (0.8)       | 18.0 (0.8)   | 0.510   |
| Weight at testing (kg)        | 63.0 (16.1)      | 64.0 (15.9)  | 0.710   |
| Height at testing (cm)        | 166.4 (8.7)      | 167.7 (9.1)  | 0.600   |
| Active Smoker                 | 9 (14%)          | 9 (11%)      | 0.580   |
| History of Asthma             | 18 (28%)         | 23 (28%)     | > 0.990 |

Note: Data are demonstrated as n (%) or the mean (SD).

**TABLE 2** | Demographics by maternal labor status.

|                               | Maternal Labor | Mother not in Labor | P value |
|-------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|---------|
| <b>Number</b>                 | <b>93</b>      | <b>57</b>           |         |
| Female                        | 46 (49%)       | 34 (60%)            | 0.230   |
| Birthweight (gram)            | 939 (214)      | 842 (216)           | 0.020   |
| Birthweight z-score           | -0.23 (0.79)   | -1.14 (1.08)        | < 0.001 |
| Gestational Age (weeks)       | 26.7 (1.5)     | 27.3 (1.2)          | 0.005   |
| Antenatal Corticosteroids     | 82 (88%)       | 53 (95%)            | 0.200   |
| Maternal Smoking in Pregnancy | 22 (26%)       | 6 (11%)             | 0.036   |
| Singleton Delivery            | 73 (78%)       | 50 (88%)            | 0.160   |
| Surfactant                    | 93 (100%)      | 52 (91%)            | 0.007   |
| Supplementary Oxygen at 36w   | 43 (46%)       | 29 (51%)            | 0.580   |
| Postnatal corticosteroids     | 22 (24%)       | 19 (33%)            | 0.200   |
| HFOV                          | 51 (55%)       | 26 (46%)            | 0.270   |
| Age at testing (years)        | 18.0 (0.8)     | 18.0 (0.8)          | 0.930   |
| Weight at testing (kg)        | 64.7 (16.1)    | 61.7 (15.7)         | 0.280   |
| Height at testing (cm)        | 167.4 (8.7)    | 166.6 (9.2)         | 0.730   |
| Active Smoker                 | 13 (14%)       | 5 (9%)              | 0.320   |
| History of Asthma             | 26 (28%)       | 15 (27%)            | 0.850   |

Note: Data are demonstrated as n (%) or the mean (SD).

**TABLE 3** | Lung function by type of delivery.

|                                | Vaginal Delivery | Cesarean     | Difference (95% CI)<br>(caesarian - vaginal) | Adjusted Difference <sup>a</sup><br>(95% CI) | P value |
|--------------------------------|------------------|--------------|--|--|---------|
| FEF <sub>75</sub>              | -0.81 (1.35)     | -1.15 (1.18) | -0.32 (-0.74, 0.11)                          | -0.51 (-0.99, -0.04)                         | 0.040   |
| FEF <sub>50</sub>              | -0.84 (1.16)     | -1.08 (0.97) | -0.20 (-0.55, 0.15)                          | -0.37 (-0.77, 0.03)                          | 0.070   |
| FEF <sub>25</sub>              | -0.47 (1.17)     | -0.74 (1.14) | -0.25 (-0.64, 0.13)                          | -0.42 (-0.86, 0.03)                          | 0.070   |
| FEF <sub>25-75</sub>           | -1.28 (1.36)     | -1.58 (1.21) | -0.27 (-0.70, 0.16)                          | -0.42 (-0.89, 0.06)                          | 0.096   |
| FEV <sub>1</sub>               | -1 (1.31)        | -0.99 (1.33) | 0.04 (-0.48, 0.40)                           | -0.15 (-0.66, 0.35)                          | 0.560   |
| FVC                            | -0.42 (1.30)     | -0.09 (1.36) | 0.25 (-0.20, 0.70)                           | 0.2 (-0.34, 0.74)                            | 0.480   |
| FEV <sub>1</sub> /FVC          | -0.91 (1.19)     | -1.30 (1.21) | -0.33 (-0.73, 0.07)                          | -0.48 (-0.95, 0)                             | 0.055   |
| PEF                            | -0.41 (1.16)     | -0.47 (1.05) | -0.06 (-0.42, 0.30)                          | -0.25 (-0.67, 0.18)                          | 0.270   |
| DLCO                           | -1.02 (1.20)     | -0.99 (1.02) | 0.02 (-0.36, 0.40)                           | -0.048 (-0.41, 0.50)                         | 0.840   |
| DLCO/VA                        | -1.93 (1.03)     | -2.18 (0.77) | -0.26 (-0.56, 0.05)                          | -0.27 (-0.63, 0.09)                          | 0.160   |
| FRC <sub>PLETH</sub>           | 0.45 (1.36)      | 0.71 (1.32)  | -0.27 (-0.17, 0.70)                          | -0.1 (-0.41, 0.63)                           | 0.690   |
| FRC <sub>HE</sub>              | 0.37 (1.91)      | 0.81 (2.12)  | 0.45 (-0.26, 1.15)                           | 0.05 (-0.78, 0.88)                           | 0.910   |
| RV                             | 1.02 (1.40)      | 1.06 (1.30)  | -0.04 (-0.39, 0.48)                          | 0.0009 (-0.49, 0.50)                         | 0.990   |
| TLC                            | 0.75 (1.19)      | 0.90 (1.16)  | 0.14 (-0.26, -0.54)                          | -0.04 (-0.52, 0.44)                          | 0.870   |
| Resistance (5 <sub>Hz</sub> )  | -0.10 (1.20)     | -0.18 (1.06) | -0.09 (-0.47, 0.28)                          | 0.26 (-0.16, 0.68)                           | 0.230   |
| Resistance (20 <sub>Hz</sub> ) | 0.39 (1.06)      | 0.25 (0.97)  | -0.14 (-0.47, 0.19)                          | 0.1 (-0.27, 0.48)                            | 0.590   |
| LCI                            | 9.17 (1.62)      | 9.30 (1.58)  | 0.18 (-0.41, 0.77)                           | 0.25 (-0.43, 0.93)                           | 0.480   |
| Exercise Capacity              | 1054 (258)       | 1085 (241)   | 15.4 (-74.2, 105.0)                          | -6.5 (-107.1, 94.1)                          | 0.900   |

Note: Data are presented as mean (SD)  $n = 150$  (max).

<sup>a</sup>Adjusted model includes the following covariates: birthweight z-score, gestational age, maternal smoking in pregnancy (yes/no), postnatal surfactant (yes/no), participant age at assessment and allows for nonindependence of multiple births.

**TABLE 4** | Lung function by labor status.

|                                | Maternal Labor | Mother not in Labor | Difference (95% CI)<br>(labor - no labor) | Adjusted Difference <sup>a</sup><br>(95% CI) | P value |
|--------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|---|--|---------|
| FEF <sub>75</sub>              | -0.82 (1.30)   | -1.29 (1.17)        | 0.44 (0.01, 0.86)                         | 0.50 (0.02, 0.99)                            | 0.047   |
| FEF <sub>50</sub>              | -0.82 (1.10)   | -1.22 (0.96)        | 0.39 (0.04, 0.74)                         | 0.45 (-0.05, 0.85)                           | 0.032   |
| FEF <sub>25</sub>              | -0.46 (1.17)   | -0.88 (1.10)        | 0.35 (-0.03, 0.74)                        | 0.38 (-0.07, 0.84)                           | 0.100   |
| FEF <sub>25-75</sub>           | -1.24 (1.31)   | -1.78 (1.17)        | 0.49 (0.06, 0.92)                         | 0.53 (0.05, 1.01)                            | 0.037   |
| FEV <sub>1</sub>               | -0.86 (1.29)   | -1.22 (1.35)        | 0.32 (-0.13, 0.77)                        | 0.42 (-0.08, 0.93)                           | 0.110   |
| FVC                            | -0.21 (1.28)   | -0.27 (1.44)        | 0.018 (-0.44, 0.47)                       | 0.18 (-0.36, 0.72)                           | 0.530   |
| FEV <sub>1</sub> /FVC          | -0.96 (1.19)   | -1.39 (1.21)        | 0.42 (0.02, 0.82)                         | 0.39 (-0.09, 0.88)                           | 0.120   |
| PEF                            | -0.32 (1.09)   | -0.64 (1.08)        | 0.22 (-0.14, 0.58)                        | 0.33 (-0.10, 0.76)                           | 0.140   |
| DLCO                           | -1.02 (1.10)   | -0.97 (1.10)        | -0.05 (-0.44, 0.33)                       | -0.16 (-0.61, 0.29)                          | 0.500   |
| DLCO/VA                        | -2.00 (0.98)   | -2.18 (0.76)        | 0.15 (-0.16, 0.46)                        | 0.04 (-0.32, 0.40)                           | 0.830   |
| FRC <sub>PLETH</sub>           | 0.46 (1.30)    | 0.82 (1.39)         | -0.36 (-0.8, 0.08)                        | -0.14 (-0.66, 0.38)                          | 0.610   |
| FRC <sub>HE</sub>              | 0.50 (1.98)    | 0.78 (2.13)         | -0.23 (-0.95, 0.49)                       | -0.11 (-0.74, 0.95)                          | 0.810   |
| RV                             | 0.91 (1.28)    | 1.26 (1.40)         | -0.35 (-0.79, 0.09)                       | -0.27 (-0.77, 0.22)                          | 0.290   |
| TLC                            | 0.80 (1.15)    | 0.89 (1.20)         | -0.08 (-0.49, 0.32)                       | 0.16 (-0.32, 0.65)                           | 0.520   |
| Resistance (5 <sub>Hz</sub> )  | -0.04 (1.21)   | -0.32 (0.95)        | 0.28 (-0.09, 0.65)                        | 0.13 (-0.28, 0.55)                           | 0.540   |
| Resistance (20 <sub>Hz</sub> ) | 0.43 (1.03)    | 0.12 (0.94)         | 0.31 (-0.02, 0.64)                        | 0.15 (-0.23, 0.53)                           | 0.440   |
| LCI                            | 8.99 (1.54)    | 9.63 (1.59)         | -0.63 (-1.21, -0.05)                      | -0.72 (-1.35, -0.08)                         | 0.033   |
| Exercise Capacity              | 1094 (266)     | 1044 (217)          | 38.1 (-49.9, 126.1)                       | 65.1 (-33.0, 163.2)                          | 0.190   |

Note: Data are presented as mean (SD)  $n = 150$  (max).

<sup>a</sup>Adjusted model includes the following covariates: birthweight z-score, gestational age, maternal smoking in pregnancy (yes/no), postnatal surfactant (yes/no), participant age at assessment and allows for nonindependence of multiple births.

**TABLE 5** | Exercise and respiratory outcomes by delivery type.

|                              | N   | Vaginal Delivery | Cesarean | P value <sup>a</sup><br>(unadjusted model) | P value <sup>b</sup><br>(adjusted model) |
|------------------------------|-----|------------------|----------|--|--|
| Exercise distance test       | 126 |                  |          | 0.480                                      | 0.290                                    |
| < 1000 m                     |     | 22 (45%)         | 28 (36%) |  |  |
| 1000–1249 m                  |     | 15 (31%)         | 29 (38%) |  |  |
| 1250–1500 m                  |     | 12 (24%)         | 20 (26%) |  |  |
| Self-reported exercise       | 143 |                  |          | 0.410                                      | 0.790                                    |
| None                         |     | 16 (26%)         | 26 (32%) |  |  |
| Up to 1 h/day                |     | 31 (51%)         | 41 (50%) |  |  |
| More than 1 h/day            |     | 14 (23%)         | 15 (18%) |  |  |
| Symptoms/medication          |     |                  |          |  |  |
| Any wheeze in last 12 months | 148 | 13 (20%)         | 11 (13%) | 0.270                                      | 0.240                                    |
| Current asthma               | 149 | 9 (14%)          | 5 (6%)   | 0.110                                      | 0.150                                    |
| Inhaler use                  | 149 | 9 (14%)          | 4 (5%)   | 0.077                                      | 0.060                                    |

<sup>a</sup>Model is adjusted for multiple births via robust standard error.<sup>b</sup>Model is adjusted for birthweight z-score and multiple births via robust standard error.**TABLE 6** | Self-reported symptoms and exercise tolerance by labor status.

|                              | N   | Maternal Labor | Mother not in Labor | P value <sup>a</sup><br>(unadjusted model) | P value <sup>b</sup><br>(adjusted model) |
|------------------------------|-----|----------------|---------------------|--|--|
| Exercise distance test       | 126 |                |                     | 0.520                                      | 0.690                                    |
| < 1000 m                     |     | 29 (40%)       | 21 (40%)            |  |  |
| 1000–1249 m                  |     | 22 (30%)       | 22 (42%)            |  |  |
| 1250–1500 m                  |     | 22 (30%)       | 10 (19%)            |  |  |
| Self-reported exercise       | 143 |                |                     | 0.029                                      | 0.110                                    |
| None                         |     | 22 (25%)       | 20 (36%)            |  |  |
| Up to 1 h/day                |     | 43 (49%)       | 29 (53%)            |  |  |
| More than 1 h/day            |     | 23 (26%)       | 6 (11%)             |  |  |
| Symptoms/medication          |     |                |                     |  |  |
| Any wheeze in last 12 months | 148 | 18 (20%)       | 6 (11%)             | 0.160                                      | 0.130                                    |
| Current asthma               | 149 | 12 (13%)       | 2 (4%)              | 0.070                                      | 0.080                                    |
| Inhaler use                  | 149 | 11 (12%)       | 2 (4%)              | 0.130                                      | 0.098                                    |

<sup>a</sup>Model is adjusted for multiple births via robust standard error.<sup>b</sup>Model is adjusted for birthweight z-score and multiple births via robust standard error.

Four measures of lung function (FEF<sub>75</sub>, FEF<sub>50</sub>, FEF<sub>25-75</sub>, and LCI) differed significantly between those whose mother was and was not in labor at their birth with a difference of around one-half z-score (approximately one standard deviation) for the FEF measures and approximately one-half standard deviation for LCI (Table 4).

Twenty percent of those whose mothers were not in labor reported symptoms of wheeze compared to 13% of those whose mothers were in labor, but this was not statistically significant ( $p = 0.24$ ). Overall, none of the measures of exercise or symptoms/medication differed significantly by delivery or labor status (Tables 5–6).

#### 4 | Discussion

Our study demonstrated a significant difference in small airway lung function between prematurely born young adults who were born to mothers in labor compared to those whose mothers were not in labor, while only one significant difference was observed according to mode of delivery. Differences observed were of the order of one half a standard deviation which is sizable, suggesting that the participant may be vulnerable to later respiratory morbidity. Our findings may explain the heterogeneity of evidence of the impact of mode of delivery on respiratory morbidity in later life, as labor status was not considered in many previous studies [15–19, 22]. Small airway

function tests such as FEF<sub>75</sub> have been posited as early indicators of small airway disease where FEV<sub>1</sub> and FVC values remain normal [48, 49]. Lower FEF<sub>75</sub> and FEF<sub>25-75</sub> values are linked to a number of diseases with small airway involvement [50]. Similarly, increased LCI values can indicate ventilatory homogeneity and thus demonstrate abnormalities in small airway function [51]. A possible explanation might be that in term born infants, those whose mothers were in labor established an earlier FRC and thus may have had better lung function in the perinatal period [11]. If this were the case for extremely prematurely born infants, those born after maternal labor may have had less exposure to the injurious effects of high levels of respiratory support [52]. We demonstrated that infants born to mothers not in labor were less likely to receive surfactant than those born to mothers in labor ( $p = 0.007$ ). It is possible that the higher mean gestation in the nonlabour group resulted in some clinical scenarios where surfactant was not indicated, and this was taken into consideration in the analysis.

Our data on small airway testing is broadly similar to other published evidence of lung function testing in ex-preterm adult cohorts. Yang et al. demonstrated that in an ex-preterm cohort with a mean age of 28.5 (SD 1.1), the FEF<sub>25-75</sub> z-score was  $-1.29$  (SD 1.28) [25]. Similarly, Vollsaeter et al. reported FEF<sub>25-75</sub> z-scores of  $-1.32$  (95% CI  $-1.66, -0.99$ ) at 25 years of age in an ex-preterm cohort [53]. These values were significantly worse than term-born controls. It is possible that individuals who have poorer small airway function may have early changes of respiratory disease despite normal large airway function, and that larger airway dysfunction may develop in the future.

Prematurity has been shown to have a negative effect on the immune system with one study showing decreased activation of neutrophils associated with premature birth [54]. In addition, prematurity is associated with a decrease in levels of galectin-3, an important modulator and primer of the immune system [55]. An alternative explanation then for our results is that exposure to bacteria in the birth canal stimulates the neonatal immune system, conveying protection in infancy. Several studies have demonstrated that a lack of exposure to microbes in early life is associated with the development of asthma in later life [56, 57].

Our study has several strengths and some limitations. We measured lung function in a large number of extremely prematurely born individuals at 16–19 years of age and thus were able to tease out the effects of the mode of delivery from whether the mothers were in labor. Our analysis adjusted for maternal and neonatal factors—but it is possible that differences in birthweight may have accounted for some of our findings. We had formally assessed the smoking habits of the individuals, a known risk factor for impaired lung function in young adults born prematurely [24, 58]. We did not have data regarding ventilatory settings in the first week after birth to confirm our hypothesis that those born after maternal labor might have had better lung function after birth, but other evidence would suggest that is correct [59, 60]. Non-respondents were more likely to be non-white, have cranial ultrasound abnormalities, mothers who smoked, or have had pulmonary hemorrhages—this may have impacted on our findings. We also acknowledge that FEF<sub>75</sub> or FEF<sub>25-75</sub> measurements are not recognized by ERS/ATS technical guidelines for the identification of small airway disease, due to

concerns about poor reproducibility. We have reported z-scores to try and mitigate this.

In conclusion, we have demonstrated that very prematurely born individuals born after maternal labor demonstrated evidence of better small airway function at 16–19 years than those who were not, but mode of delivery was not associated with differences in lung function in young adults. It is possible that we have identified a cohort of individuals within a high-risk group who have early signs of small airway disease, despite relatively normal lung function testing overall, and are at higher long-term risk of respiratory morbidity. Clinicians should be aware that the absence of maternal labor may adversely influence the long-term respiratory health of extremely preterm infants. It would be important to further follow this cohort to determine if the small airway changes are subsequently associated with other lung function abnormalities.

### Author Contributions

**Sean Armstrong:** writing—original draft, writing—review and editing, formal analysis, visualization, data curation. **Christopher Harris:** investigation, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing, formal analysis, data curation, conceptualization. **Mohadeseh Kazemi:** methodology, formal analysis, data curation. **Alan Lunt:** investigation, visualization, resources. **Janet Peacock:** writing—review and editing, formal analysis; data curation, methodology. **Anne Greenough:** conceptualization, investigation, funding acquisition, writing—review and editing, supervision, project administration.

### Acknowledgments

The Lochlan and Greer Foundation; BlackRock UK; NIHR Biomedical Research Center based at Guy's and St Thomas NHS Foundation Trust and King's College London.

### Ethics Statement

Ethical approval for UKOS was granted by the Thames Multicentre Research Ethics Committee and for the follow-up study by the North-East-Tyne & Wear South Research Ethics Committee.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### References

1. R. M. Tribe, P. D. Taylor, N. M. Kelly, D. Rees, J. Sandall, and H. P. Kennedy, "Parturition and the Perinatal Period: Can Mode of Delivery Impact on the Future Health of the Neonate?," *The Journal of Physiology* 596, no. 23 (2018): 5709–5722, <https://doi.org/10.1113/JP275429>.
2. M. J. Hyde and N. Modi, "The Long-Term Effects of Birth by Caesarean Section: The Case for a Randomised Controlled Trial," *Early Human Development* 88, no. 12 (2012): 943–949, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2012.09.006>.
3. R. Gitau, E. Menson, V. Pickles, N. M. Fisk, V. Glover, and N. MacLachlan, "Umbilical Cortisol Levels as an Indicator of the Fetal

- Stress Response to Assisted Vaginal Delivery,” *European Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology and Reproductive Biology* 98, no. 1 (2001): 14–17, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0301-2115\(01\)00298-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0301-2115(01)00298-6).
4. J. A. Bird, J. A. Spencer, T. Mould, and M. E. Symonds, “Endocrine and Metabolic Adaptation Following Caesarean Section or Vaginal Delivery,” *Archives of Disease in Childhood - Fetal and Neonatal Edition* 74, no. 2 SUPPL (1996): F132–F134, <https://doi.org/10.1136/fn.74.2.f132>.
5. L. Heasman, J. A. D. Spencer, and M. E. Symonds, “Plasma Prolactin Concentrations After Caesarean Section or Vaginal Delivery,” *Archives of Disease in Childhood - Fetal and Neonatal Edition* 77, no. 3 (1997): F237–F238, <https://doi.org/10.1136/fn.77.3.f237>.
6. A. Chiş, R. Vulturar, S. Andreica, A. Prodan, and A. C. Miu, “Behavioral and Cortisol Responses to Stress in Newborn Infants: Effects of Mode of Delivery,” *Psychoneuroendocrinology* 86, no. September (2017): 203–208, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2017.09.024>.
7. E. Yektaei-Karin, A. Moshfegh, J. Lundahl, V. Berggren, L. O. Hansson, and G. Marchini, “The Stress of Birth Enhances In Vitro Spontaneous and IL-8-Induced Neutrophil Chemotaxis in the Human Newborn,” *Pediatric Allergy and Immunology* 18, no. 8 (2007): 643–651, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1399-3038.2007.00578.x>.
8. M. G. Dominguez-Bello, E. K. Costello, M. Contreras, et al., “Delivery Mode Shapes the Acquisition and Structure of the Initial Microbiota Across Multiple Body Habitats in Newborns,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 107, no. 26 (2010): 11971–11975, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1002601107>.
9. O. Sakwinska, F. Foata, B. Berger, et al., “Does the Maternal Vaginal Microbiota Play a Role in Seeding the Microbiota of Neonatal Gut and Nose?,” *Beneficial Microbes* 8, no. 5 (2017): 763–778, <https://doi.org/10.3920/BM2017.0064>.
10. L. Jain and D. C. Eaton, “Physiology of Fetal Lung Fluid Clearance and the Effect of Labor,” *Seminars in Perinatology* 30, no. 1 (2006): 34–43, <https://doi.org/10.1053/j.semperi.2006.01.006>.
11. H. Vyas, A. D. Milner, I. E. Hopkin, and A. D. Falconer, “Role of Labour in the Establishment of Functional Residual Capacity at Birth,” *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 58, no. 7 (1983): 512–517, <https://doi.org/10.1136/adc.58.7.512>.
12. P. Bager, J. Wohlfahrt, and T. Westergaard, “Caesarean Delivery and Risk of Atopy and Allergic Disease: Meta-Analyses,” *Clinical & Experimental Allergy* 38, no. 4 (2008): 634–642, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2222.2008.02939.x>.
13. S. Thavagnanam, J. Fleming, A. Bromley, M. D. Shields, and C. R. Cardwell, “A Meta-Analysis of the Association Between Caesarean Section and Childhood Asthma,” *Clinical & Experimental Allergy* 38, no. 4 (2008): 629–633, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2222.2007.02780.x>.
14. O. E. Keag, J. E. Norman, and S. J. Stock, “Long-Term Risks and Benefits Associated With Cesarean Delivery for Mother, Baby, and Subsequent Pregnancies: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” *PLoS Medicine* 15, no. 1 (2018): e1002494, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002494>.
15. A. Maitra, A. Sherriff, D. Strachan, and J. Henderson, “Mode of Delivery Is Not Associated With Asthma or Atopy in Childhood,” *Clinical & Experimental Allergy* 34, no. 9 (2004): 1349–1355, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2222.2004.02048.x>.
16. Y. J. Juhn, A. Weaver, S. Katusic, and J. Yunginger, “Mode of Delivery at Birth and Development of Asthma: A Population-Based Cohort Study,” *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* 116, no. 3 (2005): 510–516, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaci.2005.05.043>.
17. Z. Liao, K. E. Lamb, D. Burgner, et al., “No Obvious Impact of Caesarean Delivery on Childhood Allergic Outcomes: Findings From Australian Cohorts,” *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 105, no. 7 (2020): 664–670, <https://doi.org/10.1136/archdischild-2019-317485>.
18. J. Y. Y. Leung, A. M. Li, G. M. Leung, and C. M. Schooling, “Mode of Delivery and Childhood Hospitalizations for Asthma and Other Wheezing Disorders,” *Clinical & Experimental Allergy* 45, no. 6 (2015): 1109–1117, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cea.12548>.
19. I. Brüske, Z. Pei, E. Thiering, et al., “Caesarean Section Has No Impact on Lung Function at the Age of 15 Years,” *Pediatric Pulmonology* 50, no. 12 (2015): 1262–1269, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppul.23196>.
20. Y. Salem, M. A. Oestreich, O. Fuchs, et al., “Are Children Born by Cesarean Delivery at Higher Risk for Respiratory Sequelae?,” *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 226, no. 2 (2022): 257.e1–257.e11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajog.2021.07.027>.
21. T. E. Adeyeye, E. H. Yeung, A. C. McLain, S. Lin, D. A. Lawrence, and E. M. Bell, “Wheeze and Food Allergies in Children Born via Cesarean Delivery,” *American Journal of Epidemiology* 188, no. 2 (2019): 355–362, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwy257>.
22. A. C. van Berkel, H. T. den Dekker, V. W. V. Jaddoe, et al., “Mode of Delivery and Childhood Fractional Exhaled Nitric Oxide, Interrupter Resistance and Asthma: The Generation R Study,” *Pediatric Allergy and Immunology* 26, no. 4 (2015): 330–336, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pai.12385>.
23. L. W. Doyle, S. Andersson, A. Bush, et al., “Expiratory Airflow in Late Adolescence and Early Adulthood in Individuals Born Very Pre-term or With Very Low Birthweight Compared With Controls Born at Term or With Normal Birthweight: A Meta-Analysis of Individual Participant Data,” *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine* 7, no. 8 (2019): 677–686, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(18\)30530-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(18)30530-7).
24. D. S. Bui, C. J. Lodge, J. A. Burgess, et al., “Childhood Predictors of Lung Function Trajectories and Future COPD Risk: A Prospective Cohort Study From the First to the Sixth Decade of Life,” *The Lancet Respiratory Medicine* 6, no. 7 (2018): 535–544, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(18\)30100-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(18)30100-0).
25. J. Yang, R. A. Kingsford, J. Horwood, et al., “Lung Function of Adults Born at Very Low Birth Weight,” *Pediatrics* 145, no. 2 (2020): e20192359, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-2359>.
26. C. Harris, A. Bisquera, A. Lunt, J. L. Peacock, and A. Greenough, “Outcomes of the Neonatal Trial of High-Frequency Oscillation at 16 to 19 Years,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 383, no. 7 (2020): 689–691, <https://doi.org/10.1056/nejmc2004773>.
27. A. H. Johnson, J. L. Peacock, A. Greenough, et al., “High-Frequency Oscillatory Ventilation for the Prevention of Chronic Lung Disease of Prematurity,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 347, no. 9 (2002): 633–642, <https://doi.org/10.1097/01.sa.0000087693.31092.80>.
28. M. R. Miller, R. Crapo, J. Hankinson, et al., “General Considerations for Lung Function Testing,” *European Respiratory Journal* 26, no. 1 (2005): 153–161, <https://doi.org/10.1183/09031936.05.00034505>.
29. N. Macintyre, R. O. Crapo, G. Viegi, et al., “Standardisation of the Single-Breath Determination of Carbon Monoxide Uptake in the Lung,” *European Respiratory Journal* 26, no. 4 (2005): 720–735, <https://doi.org/10.1183/09031936.05.00034905>.
30. E. Oostveen, D. MacLeod, H. Lorino, et al., “The Forced Oscillation Technique in Clinical Practice: Methodology, Recommendations and Future Developments,” *European Respiratory Journal* 22, no. 6 (2003): 1026–1041, <https://doi.org/10.1183/09031936.03.00089403>.
31. H. Smith, P. Reinhold, and M. Goldman, “Forced Oscillation Technique and Impulse Oscillometry,” *European Respiratory Monograph* 31 (2005): 72–105, <https://doi.org/10.1183/1025448x.00031005>.
32. M. R. Miller, J. Hankinson, V. Brusasco, et al., “Standardisation of Spirometry,” *European Respiratory Journal* 26, no. 2 (2005): 319–338, <https://doi.org/10.1183/09031936.05.00034805>.
33. A. R. Horsley, P. M. Gustafsson, K. A. Macleod, et al., “Lung Clearance Index Is a Sensitive, Repeatable and Practical Measure of Airways Disease in Adults With Cystic Fibrosis,” *Thorax* 63, no. 2 (2007): 135–140, <https://doi.org/10.1136/thx.2007.082628>.

34. F. Trinkmann, M. Maros, K. Roth, et al., "Multiple Breath Washout (MBW) Testing Using Sulfur Hexafluoride: Reference Values and Influence of Anthropometric Parameters," *Thorax* 76, no. 4 (2021): 380–386, <https://doi.org/10.1136/thoraxjnl-2020-214717>.
35. P. H. Quanjer, S. Stanojevic, T. J. Cole, et al., "Multi-Ethnic Reference Values for Spirometry for the 3-95-yr Age Range: The Global Lung Function 2012 Equations," *European Respiratory Journal* 40, no. 6 (2012): 1324–1343, <https://doi.org/10.1183/09031936.00080312>.
36. J. Wanger, J. L. Clausen, A. Coates, et al., "Standardisation of the Measurement of Lung Volumes," *European Respiratory Journal* 26, no. 3 (2005): 511–522, <https://doi.org/10.1183/09031936.05.00035005>.
37. M. Rosenthal, D. Cramer, S. H. Bain, D. Denison, A. Bush, and J. O. Warner, "Lung Function in White Children Aged 4 to 19 Years: II—Single Breath Analysis and Plethysmography," *Thorax* 48, no. 8 (1993): 803–808, <https://doi.org/10.1136/thx.48.8.803>.
38. M. Rosenthal, S. H. Bain, D. Cramer, et al., "Lung Function in White Children Aged 4 to 19 Years: I—Spirometry," *Thorax* 48, no. 8 (1993): 794–802, <https://doi.org/10.1136/thx.48.8.794>.
39. C. Harris, A. Lunt, A. Bisquera, J. Peacock, and A. Greenough, "Lung Function and Exercise Capacity in Prematurely Born Young People," *Pediatric Pulmonology* 55, no. 9 (2020): 2289–2295, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ppul.24918>.
40. A. L. Carrel, J. Bowser, D. White, et al., "Standardized Childhood Fitness Percentiles Derived From School-Based Testing," *The Journal of Pediatrics* 161, no. 1 (2012): 120–124, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2012.01.036>.
41. G. R. Tomkinson, J. J. Lang, M. S. Tremblay, et al., "International Normative 20 m Shuttle Run Values From 1 142 026 Children and Youth Representing 50 Countries," *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 51, no. 21 (2017): 1545–1554, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bjsports-2016-095987>.
42. S. Zivanovic, J. Peacock, M. Alcazar-Paris, et al., "Late Outcomes of a Randomized Trial of High-Frequency Oscillation in Neonates," *New England Journal of Medicine* 370, no. 12 (2014): 1121–1130, <https://doi.org/10.1056/nejmoa1309220>.
43. A. Wilson, *Pulmonary Function Testing, Indications and Interpretations* (Grune & Stratton, 1985).
44. J. E. McDonough, R. Yuan, M. Suzuki, et al., "Small-Airway Obstruction and Emphysema in Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease," *New England Journal of Medicine* 365, no. 17 (2011): 1567–1575, <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMoa1106955>.
45. M. Cosio, H. Ghezzi, J. C. Hogg, et al., "The Relations Between Structural Changes in Small Airways and Pulmonary Function-Tests," *New England Journal of Medicine* 298, no. 23 (1978): 1277–1281.
46. O. Sauzet, K. C. Wright, L. Marston, P. Brocklehurst, and J. L. Peacock, "Modelling the Hierarchical Structure in Datasets With Very Small Clusters: A Simulation Study to Explore the Effect of the Proportion of Clusters When the Outcome Is Continuous," *Statistics in Medicine* 32, no. 8 (2013): 1429–1438, <https://doi.org/10.1002/sim.5638>.
47. O. Sauzet and J. L. Peacock, "Binomial Outcomes in Dataset With Some Clusters of Size Two: Can the Dependence of Twins be Accounted for? A Simulation Study Comparing the Reliability of Statistical Methods Based on a Dataset of Preterm Infants," *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 17, no. 1 (2017): 110, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12874-017-0369-6>.
48. D. S. Kwon, Y. J. Choi, T. H. Kim, et al., "FEF<sub>25-75%</sub> Values in Patients With Normal Lung Function Can Predict the Development of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease," *International Journal of Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease* 15 (2020): 2913–2921, <https://doi.org/10.2147/COPD.S261732>.
49. M. Malerba, A. Radaeli, A. Olivini, et al., "Association of FEF<sub>25-75%</sub> Impairment With Bronchial Hyperresponsiveness and Airway Inflammation in Subjects With Asthma-Like Symptoms," *Respiration* 91, no. 3 (2016): 206–214, <https://doi.org/10.1159/000443797>.
50. D. Hoesterey, N. Das, W. Janssens, et al., "Spirometric Indices of Early Airflow Impairment in Individuals at Risk of Developing COPD: Spirometry Beyond FEV<sub>1</sub>/FVC," *Respiratory Medicine* 156 (2019): 58–68, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rmed.2019.08.004>.
51. P. Latzin, C. Thamrin, and R. Kraemer, "Ventilation Inhomogeneities Assessed by the Multibreath Washout (MBW) Technique," *Thorax* 63, no. 2 (2007): 98–99, <https://doi.org/10.1136/thx.2007.085332>.
52. T. M. Berger, M. Fontana, and M. Stocker, "The Journey Towards Lung Protective Respiratory Support in Preterm Neonates," *Neonatology* 104, no. 4 (2013): 265–274, <https://doi.org/10.1159/000354419>.
53. M. Vollsæter, H. H. Clemm, E. Satrell, et al., "Adult Respiratory Outcomes of Extreme Preterm Birth: A Regional Cohort Study," *Annals of the American Thoracic Society* 12, no. 3 (2015): 313–322, <https://doi.org/10.1513/AnnalsATS.201406-285OC>.
54. S. L. Raymond, B. J. Mathias, T. J. Murphy, et al., "Neutrophil Chemotaxis and Transcriptomics in Term and Preterm Neonates," *Translational Research* 190 (2017): 4–15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trsl.2017.08.003>.
55. M. Sundqvist, V. Osla, B. Jacobsson, A. Rudin, K. Sävman, and A. Karlsson, "Cord Blood Neutrophils Display a Galectin-3 Responsive Phenotype Accentuated by Vaginal Delivery," *BMC Pediatrics* 13 (2013): 128, <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2431-13-128>.
56. Y. J. Huang, "The Respiratory Microbiome and Innate Immunity in Asthma," *Current Opinion in Pulmonary Medicine* 21, no. 1 (2015): 27–32, <https://doi.org/10.1097/MCP.0000000000000124>.
57. Y. J. Huang and H. A. Boushey, "The Microbiome in Asthma," *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology* 135, no. 1 (2015): 25–30, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaci.2014.11.011>.
58. C. E. Bolton, A. Bush, J. R. Hurst, S. Kotecha, and L. McGarvey, "Lung Consequences in Adults Born Prematurely," *Thorax* 70, no. 6 (2015): 574–580, <https://doi.org/10.1136/thoraxjnl-2014-206590>.
59. S. M. Schulzke, G. L. Hall, E. A. Nathan, K. Simmer, G. Nolan, and J. J. Pillow, "Lung Volume and Ventilation Inhomogeneity in Preterm Infants at 15-18 Months Corrected Age," *The Journal of Pediatrics* 156, no. 4 (2010): 542–549.e2, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2009.10.017>.
60. H. S. Fischer and C. Bühner, "Avoiding Endotracheal Ventilation to Prevent Bronchopulmonary Dysplasia: A Meta-Analysis," *Pediatrics* 132, no. 5 (2013): e1351–e1360, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-1880>.

### Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.