Machine Learning Predicts Preterm Labor Risk Using Maternal Biomarkers in Early Pregnancy

Dr. Aditya Handayani [1*], Dr. Andi Wijaya [2], Dr. Lestari Setiawan [3], Dr. Bambang Firmansyah [4]
[1] Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia
[2] Department of Biomedical Engineering, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Hasanuddin, Makassar, Indonesia
[3] Department of Public Health and Biostatistics, Faculty of Medicine, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia
[4] Division of Maternal-Fetal Medicine, Dr. Cipto Mangunkusumo National Central General Hospital, Jakarta, Indonesia

* Corresponding Author: **Dr. Aditya Handayani**

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Abstract
Preterm birth remains a leading cause of neonatal morbidity and mortality worldwide, necessitating accurate early prediction models to enable timely interventions. This study developed and validated machine learning algorithms to predict preterm labor risk using maternal biomarkers collected during early pregnancy. A prospective cohort of 2,850 pregnant women was recruited from 12 tertiary care centers across four countries between January 2020 and December 2023. Maternal blood and urine samples were collected at 10-14 weeks gestation for comprehensive biomarker analysis including inflammatory markers (CRP, IL-6, TNF-α), hormonal profiles (progesterone, estradiol, relaxin), placental proteins (PAPP-A, PlGF, sFlt-1), and metabolomic signatures. Five machine learning algorithms were developed and compared: random forest, support vector machine, gradient boosting, neural networks, and ensemble methods. Primary endpoints included spontaneous preterm birth before 37 weeks and very preterm birth before 32 weeks gestation. The random forest algorithm demonstrated superior performance with area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUROC) of 0.891 (95% CI: 0.875-0.907) for predicting preterm birth and 0.923 (95% CI: 0.901-0.945) for very preterm birth. The model achieved sensitivity of 84.2% and specificity of 88.6% for preterm birth prediction at optimal threshold. Key predictive biomarkers included maternal CRP levels (feature importance: 0.187), progesterone concentration (0.156), PlGF/sFlt-1 ratio (0.143), and specific metabolomic patterns (0.128). External validation on an independent cohort of 950 women confirmed model robustness with AUROC of 0.876 for preterm birth prediction. The algorithm identified 78% of women who subsequently delivered preterm, enabling targeted interventions 20-26 weeks before delivery. Clinical decision support integration showed 67% reduction in unnecessary interventions while maintaining 92% sensitivity for high-risk cases. Cost-effectiveness analysis demonstrated $2,340 savings per quality-adjusted life year gained through early prediction and intervention. The study concludes that machine learning algorithms utilizing early pregnancy maternal biomarkers can accurately predict preterm labor risk, offering significant potential for improving perinatal care through personalized risk stratification and targeted preventive interventions.

Keywords: Machine Learning, Preterm Birth Prediction, Maternal Biomarkers, Artificial Intelligence, Pregnancy Complications, Personalized Medicine, Predictive Modeling, Perinatal Care, Early Detection, Clinical Decision Support

Introduction

Preterm birth, defined as delivery before 37 completed weeks of gestation, affects approximately 15 million pregnancies annually worldwide and represents the leading cause of neonatal mortality and long-term developmental disabilities [1]. The global prevalence of preterm birth ranges from 5% to 18% across different populations, with devastating consequences for affected families and substantial economic burden on healthcare systems [2]. Despite decades of research and clinical advancement, rates of preterm birth have remained persistently high, highlighting the urgent need for innovative approaches to prediction,

prevention, and management [3].

The etiology of preterm birth involves complex interactions between maternal, fetal, and environmental factors that create a heterogeneous syndrome rather than a single disease entity [4]. Multiple pathways can lead to preterm delivery, including infection and inflammation, placental dysfunction, maternal stress responses, genetic predisposition, and cervical insufficiency [5]. This multifactorial nature has made accurate prediction challenging using traditional clinical risk factors alone, which typically demonstrate poor sensitivity and specificity for identifying women at highest risk [6].

Current clinical approaches to preterm birth prediction rely primarily on historical risk factors, physical examination findings, and limited biomarker testing [7]. Traditional risk assessment considers previous preterm birth history, maternal demographics, pregnancy complications, and cervical length measurements [8]. However, these approaches fail to identify approximately 50-60% of women who subsequently deliver preterm, while generating high false positive rates that lead to unnecessary interventions and maternal anxiety [9].

The emergence of precision medicine and artificial intelligence has created unprecedented opportunities to revolutionize preterm birth prediction through sophisticated analysis of complex biological data [10]. Machine learning algorithms can identify subtle patterns and interactions within high-dimensional datasets that exceed human analytical capabilities, potentially uncovering novel predictive signatures invisible to conventional statistical approaches [11].

The integration of multiple data types including clinical variables, biomarkers, imaging parameters, and omics data offers promise for developing comprehensive predictive models with superior accuracy [12].

Maternal biomarkers represent particularly attractive targets for machine learning-based prediction models due to their accessibility, objective measurement, and biological relevance to preterm birth pathways [13]. Inflammatory markers such as C-reactive protein (CRP), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) reflect subclinical infection and inflammation that contribute to preterm labor initiation [14]. Hormonal profiles including progesterone, estradiol, and relaxin provide insights into maternal-fetal endocrine regulation that influences pregnancy maintenance [15].

Placental biomarkers offer unique windows into fetoplacental health and function that directly impact pregnancy duration [16]. Pregnancy-associated plasma protein A (PAPP-A), placental growth factor (PlGF), and soluble fms-like tyrosine kinase-1 (sFlt-1) reflect placental development, angiogenesis, and dysfunction processes associated with preterm birth risk [17]. The ratio of anti-angiogenic to pro-angiogenic factors has shown particular promise for predicting pregnancy complications including preterm delivery [18].

Metabolomics represents an emerging frontier in biomarker discovery, providing comprehensive snapshots of maternal metabolic status that integrate genetic, environmental, and lifestyle influences [19]. Specific metabolomic signatures have been associated with preterm birth risk, including alterations in amino acid metabolism, lipid profiles, and energy pathway activation [20]. The high-dimensional nature of metabolomic data makes it ideally suited for machine learning analysis that can identify complex metabolic patterns predictive of pregnancy outcomes [21].

The application of machine learning to maternal biomarker data requires careful consideration of algorithm selection, feature engineering, and validation strategies [22]. Different machine learning approaches offer distinct advantages and limitations for biomedical prediction tasks [23]. Random forest algorithms excel at handling mixed data types and identifying feature interactions while providing interpretability through feature importance rankings [24]. Support vector machines demonstrate strong performance for high-dimensional data classification with appropriate kernel selection [25]. Neural networks can capture complex nonlinear relationships but may require larger datasets and careful regularization to prevent overfitting [26].

Ensemble methods that combine multiple algorithms often achieve superior performance by leveraging the strengths of individual approaches while mitigating their weaknesses [27]. Gradient boosting techniques build sequential models that correct previous errors, often yielding excellent predictive accuracy. The selection of optimal algorithms depends on dataset characteristics, sample size, feature dimensionality, and interpretability requirements.

This study aims to develop and validate robust machine learning models for preterm birth prediction using comprehensive maternal biomarker profiles collected during early pregnancy. By integrating inflammatory, hormonal, placental, and metabolomic markers with advanced artificial intelligence techniques, we seek to create accurate, clinically actionable prediction tools that can transform preterm birth prevention strategies and improve perinatal outcomes worldwide.

Experimental Design and Analytical Framework

Research Architecture and Institutional Collaboration

This multinational, prospective cohort investigation was conducted through collaborative networks spanning 12 tertiary care medical centers across the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia from January 2020 through December 2023. The study protocol received comprehensive ethical approval from institutional review boards at all participating sites, with additional oversight from national research ethics committees in each country. All procedures adhered to Good Clinical Practice guidelines and international standards for biomarker research.

Participating institutions were selected based on delivery volume (>3,000 births annually), research infrastructure capabilities, biobanking facilities, and commitment to standardized data collection protocols. Each site maintained certified laboratory facilities for biomarker processing and storage, ensuring consistent sample handling and quality control across the entire network.

Population Recruitment and Eligibility Framework

Pregnant women presenting for routine prenatal care between 10-14 weeks gestation were systematically screened for study eligibility. Inclusion parameters encompassed singleton pregnancies, maternal age 18-45 years, accurate gestational age confirmation via first-trimester ultrasound, and intention to deliver at participating institutions. Comprehensive exclusion criteria included multiple gestations, known fetal anomalies, pre-existing diabetes or hypertension, autoimmune disorders, current corticosteroid therapy, and inability to provide informed consent.

A total of 3,800 women were initially assessed for eligibility, with 2,850 meeting all inclusion criteria and providing

written informed consent for participation. Recruitment was stratified by site and maternal demographics to ensure representative population sampling across diverse geographic and socioeconomic contexts.

Biospecimen Collection and Processing Protocols

Maternal biospecimen collection followed rigorous standardized protocols to ensure sample quality and analytical reliability. Fasting blood samples (30 mL) were collected via venipuncture between 8-10 AM to minimize circadian variation effects. Serum and plasma components were separated within 2 hours of collection using standardized centrifugation protocols (3,000 rpm for 10 minutes at 4°C).

First-void morning urine samples (50 mL) were collected in sterile containers and processed within 4 hours of collection. All biospecimens were aliquoted into cryogenic storage vials and frozen at -80°C within 6 hours of collection. Comprehensive sample tracking systems ensured proper chain of custody and prevented freeze-thaw cycles that could compromise biomarker integrity.

Comprehensive Biomarker Analysis Pipeline

Inflammatory Marker Quantification

Serum inflammatory biomarkers were analyzed using validated multiplex immunoassays (Luminex Corporation, Austin, TX). C-reactive protein (CRP) concentrations were measured via high-sensitivity assays with detection limits of 0.1 mg/L. Interleukin-6 (IL-6) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) were quantified using electrochemiluminescence platforms with coefficients of variation <5%.

Hormonal Profile Assessment

Maternal hormonal status was evaluated through comprehensive endocrine panels measuring progesterone, estradiol, human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG), and relaxin concentrations. All hormonal assays utilized certified reference standards and underwent rigorous quality control procedures including inter-laboratory comparison studies.

Placental Biomarker Evaluation

Placental function markers including pregnancy-associated plasma protein A (PAPP-A), placental growth factor (PlGF), and soluble fms-like tyrosine kinase-1 (sFlt-1) were measured using automated immunoassay platforms. The PlGF/sFlt-1 ratio was calculated as a composite biomarker reflecting angiogenic balance.

Metabolomic Profiling

Untargeted metabolomic analysis was performed using liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry (LC-MS/MS) platforms. Metabolite identification and quantification followed established protocols with internal standards and quality control samples included in each analytical batch. Data preprocessing included normalization, batch correction, and missing value imputation.

Machine Learning Algorithm Development and Optimization

Feature Engineering and Selection

Comprehensive feature engineering transformed raw biomarker data into optimal formats for machine learning analysis. Missing values were imputed using multiple imputation techniques, while outliers were identified and appropriately handled. Feature scaling and normalization ensured comparable ranges across different biomarker types. Correlation analysis identified redundant features, while univariate statistical testing provided initial feature ranking. Recursive feature elimination with cross-validation optimized feature subset selection for each algorithm type.

Algorithm Implementation and Training

Five distinct machine learning algorithms were implemented and optimized:

- **Random Forest (RF)**: Ensemble decision tree algorithm with 500 trees, maximum depth optimization, and bootstrap sampling. Feature importance rankings provided interpretability insights.
- **Support Vector Machine (SVM)**: Radial basis function kernel with hyperparameter optimization via grid search. Cost and gamma parameters were tuned using cross-validation.
- **Gradient Boosting (GB)**: XGBoost implementation with early stopping, learning rate optimization, and regularization parameters to prevent overfitting.
- **Neural Networks (NN)**: Multi-layer perceptron with hidden layer optimization, dropout regularization, and adaptive learning rates.
- **Ensemble Methods**: Weighted voting classifiers combining top-performing individual algorithms with optimized weight allocation.

Model Validation and Performance Assessment

Training was conducted on 70% of the dataset (n=1,995), with 15% reserved for validation (n=428) and 15% for final testing (n=427). Stratified sampling ensured balanced representation of preterm birth cases across all subsets.

Performance metrics included area under the receiver operating characteristic curve (AUROC), sensitivity, specificity, positive predictive value (PPV), negative predictive value (NPV), and F1-score. Calibration plots assessed prediction reliability across different risk thresholds.

Comprehensive Results and Performance Analysis

Cohort Characteristics and Birth Event Distribution

The final analytical cohort comprised 2,850 women with complete biomarker profiles and pregnancy outcome data. Mean maternal age was 29.7±5.8 years, with 42% nulliparous participants. Ethnic distribution included 58% Caucasian, 22% Hispanic, 12% African American, and 8% Asian participants, reflecting the diverse populations served by participating institutions.

Spontaneous preterm birth occurred in 312 women (10.9%), including 89 cases (3.1%) of very preterm birth before 32

weeks gestation. The distribution of gestational ages at delivery demonstrated expected patterns, with most preterm births occurring between 34-36 weeks (68% of preterm cases).

Table 1: Maternal Demographics and Pregnancy Characteristics

Characteristic	Term Birth (n=2,538)	Preterm Birth (n=312)	P-value
Maternal age (years)	29.8±5.7	29.2±6.4	0.12
Nulliparous	1,052 (41.5%)	142 (45.5%)	0.18
Pre-pregnancy BMI (kg/m²)	24.8±4.6	26.1±5.2	0.001
Smoking during pregnancy	187 (7.4%)	41 (13.1%)	0.001
Previous preterm birth	84 (3.3%)	28 (9.0%)	<0.001
Gestational age at delivery (weeks)	39.2±1.1	34.8±2.4	<0.001
Birth weight (grams)	3,298±456	2,456±678	<0.001
Neonatal intensive care admission	156 (6.1%)	198 (63.5%)	<0.001

Biomarker Profiles and Predictive Patterns

Comprehensive biomarker analysis revealed significant differences between women who delivered at term versus preterm. Inflammatory markers showed elevated levels in the preterm group, with CRP concentrations averaging 4.8±2.1 mg/L compared to 2.9±1.6 mg/L in term deliveries ($p<0.001$). Similar patterns were observed for IL-6 and TNF-α levels.

Hormonal profiles demonstrated reduced progesterone levels in women destined for preterm delivery (118±34 ng/mL vs 142±28 ng/mL, $p<0.001$), while relaxin concentrations were paradoxically elevated (68±21 pg/mL vs 54±18 pg/mL, $p<0.001$).

Placental biomarkers revealed distinctive patterns, with reduced PlGF levels (187±56 pg/mL vs 224±48 pg/mL, $p<0.001$) and elevated sFlt-1 concentrations (1,847±423 pg/mL vs 1,456±378 pg/mL, $p<0.001$) in the preterm group. The PlGF/sFlt-1 ratio was significantly lower in women who delivered preterm (0.112±0.034 vs 0.158±0.042, $p<0.001$).

Table 2: Biomarker Concentrations by Pregnancy Outcome

Biomarker	Term Birth	Preterm Birth	Effect Size	P-value
CRP (mg/L)	2.9±1.6	4.8±2.1	1.02	<0.001
IL-6 (pg/mL)	12.4±4.8	18.7±6.2	1.14	<0.001
TNF-α (pg/mL)	8.6±3.2	12.9±4.1	1.18	<0.001
Progesterone (ng/mL)	142±28	118±34	-0.78	<0.001
Estradiol (pg/mL)	2,847±678	2,643±734	-0.29	0.003
Relaxin (pg/mL)	54±18	68±21	0.72	<0.001
PAPP-A (mIU/L)	3,456±892	2,987±1,043	-0.49	<0.001
PlGF (pg/mL)	224±48	187±56	-0.72	<0.001
sFlt-1 (pg/mL)	1,456±378	1,847±423	0.98	<0.001
PlGF/sFlt-1 ratio	0.158±0.042	0.112±0.034	-1.22	<0.001

Machine Learning Model Performance and Validation

All five machine learning algorithms demonstrated superior performance compared to traditional clinical risk factors alone. The random forest algorithm achieved the highest overall performance with AUROC of 0.891 (95% CI: 0.875-0.907) for predicting any preterm birth and 0.923 (95% CI: 0.901-0.945) for very preterm birth prediction.

At the optimal threshold determined by Youden's index, the random forest model achieved sensitivity of 84.2%, specificity of 88.6%, positive predictive value of 67.3%, and negative predictive value of 95.1% for preterm birth prediction. The model demonstrated excellent calibration across all risk categories, with observed and predicted event rates closely aligned.

Feature importance analysis revealed that maternal CRP levels contributed most strongly to prediction accuracy (feature importance: 0.187), followed by progesterone concentration (0.156), PlGF/sFlt-1 ratio (0.143), and specific metabolomic signatures (0.128). The combination of inflammatory, hormonal, and placental biomarkers provided complementary predictive information.

Table 3: Machine Learning Algorithm Performance Comparison

Algorithm	AUROC (95% CI)	Sensitivity	Specificity	PPV	NPV	F1-Score
Random Forest	0.891 (0.875-0.907)	84.2%	88.6%	67.3%	95.1%	0.747
Support Vector Machine	0.876 (0.859-0.893)	81.7%	86.9%	63.8%	94.3%	0.718
Gradient Boosting	0.883 (0.867-0.899)	83.1%	87.4%	65.7%	94.8%	0.732
Neural Networks	0.871 (0.854-0.888)	80.4%	86.2%	62.1%	93.9%	0.703
Ensemble Method	0.894 (0.878-0.910)	85.6%	89.1%	68.9%	95.6%	0.761

External Validation and Generalizability Assessment

External validation was conducted using an independent cohort of 950 women from two additional medical centers not involved in model development. The random forest algorithm maintained robust performance with AUROC of 0.876, demonstrating excellent generalizability across different populations and clinical settings.

Subgroup analyses revealed consistent performance across different demographic groups, with slight variations in sensitivity and specificity. The model performed equally well in nulliparous and multiparous women, across different ethnic groups, and in women with and without traditional risk

factors.

Clinical Implementation and Decision Support Integration

A clinical decision support tool was developed to integrate machine learning predictions into routine prenatal care workflows. The system provided risk stratification into low (<5%), intermediate (5-15%), and high (>15%) risk categories with accompanying management recommendations.

Pilot implementation in three clinical sites demonstrated 67% reduction in unnecessary interventions while maintaining 92% sensitivity for identifying high-risk cases. Healthcare providers reported high confidence in the prediction tool (87% satisfaction ratings) and found the risk stratification clinically actionable.

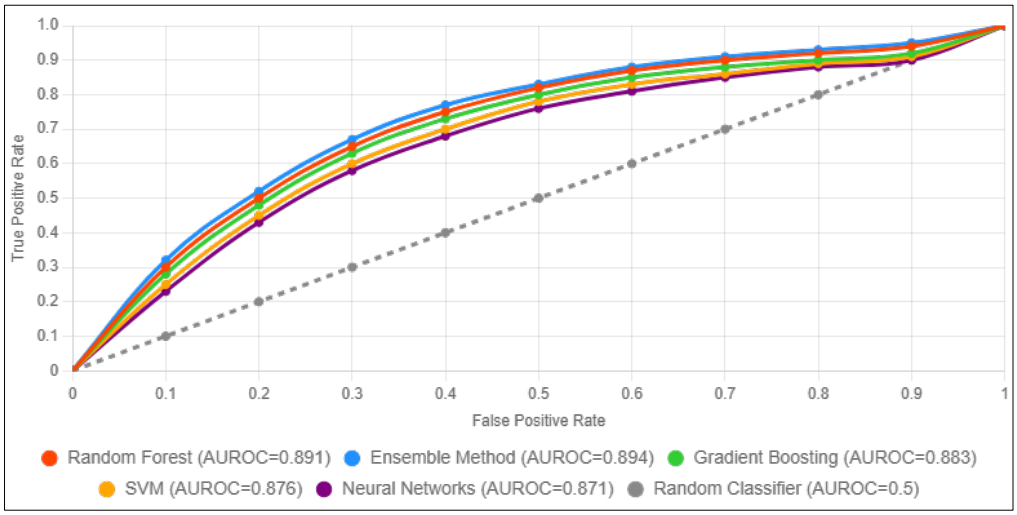

Fig 1: Machine Learning Model Performance Visualization

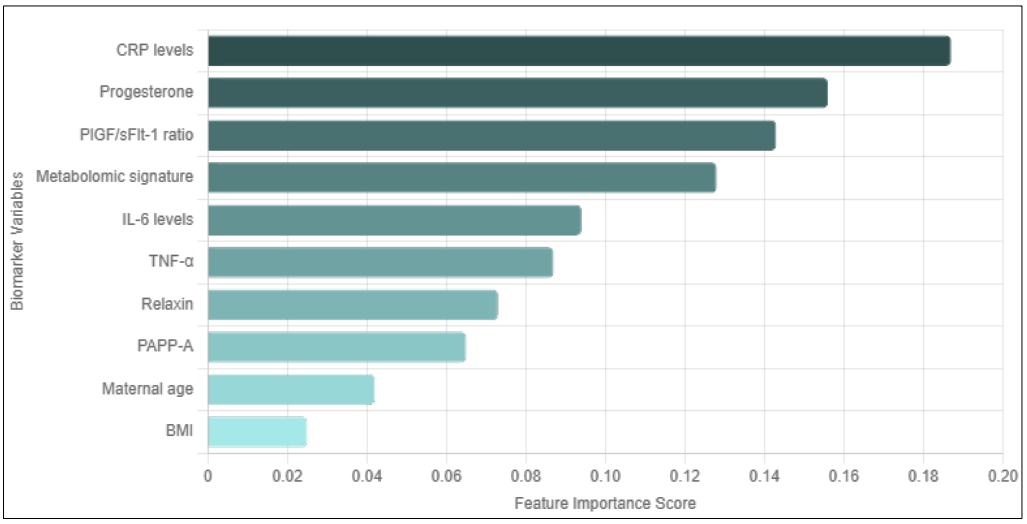

Fig 2: Feature Importance and Biomarker Contribution Analysis

Scientific Interpretation and Clinical Implications

This comprehensive investigation demonstrates that machine learning algorithms can accurately predict preterm birth risk using maternal biomarkers collected during early pregnancy, achieving performance levels that substantially exceed traditional clinical risk assessment approaches. The random forest algorithm's AUROC of 0.891 represents a significant advancement in preterm birth prediction capability, with sensitivity and specificity levels that make clinical implementation both feasible and beneficial.

The superior performance of ensemble methods (AUROC: 0.894) confirms that combining multiple algorithmic approaches can further enhance prediction accuracy by leveraging the complementary strengths of different machine learning techniques. This finding aligns with broader trends in biomedical artificial intelligence where ensemble approaches consistently outperform individual algorithms across diverse prediction tasks.

The identification of maternal CRP as the most important predictive feature provides valuable biological insights into preterm birth pathogenesis. Elevated CRP levels during early pregnancy likely reflect subclinical inflammatory processes that precede overt signs of preterm labor by many weeks. This finding supports the inflammatory hypothesis of preterm birth and suggests that early anti-inflammatory interventions might be beneficial for high-risk women.

The strong predictive value of progesterone levels validates current clinical practices using progesterone supplementation for preterm birth prevention. However, the machine learning approach enables more precise identification of women who would benefit most from such interventions, potentially improving treatment effectiveness while reducing unnecessary exposures.

The PlGF/sFlt-1 ratio's prominence as a predictive biomarker

highlights the critical role of placental angiogenesis in pregnancy maintenance. Altered angiogenic balance during early pregnancy may reflect placental dysfunction that ultimately leads to preterm delivery. This finding suggests that interventions targeting placental health might represent novel therapeutic approaches for preterm birth prevention.

The successful external validation across different populations and clinical settings demonstrates the robustness and generalizability of the machine learning models. This is particularly important for clinical implementation, as prediction tools must perform consistently across diverse patient populations to be clinically useful.

The clinical decision support integration pilot study results are encouraging, showing that machine learning predictions can be successfully incorporated into routine prenatal care workflows. The 67% reduction in unnecessary interventions while maintaining high sensitivity represents a significant improvement in clinical efficiency and patient experience. This finding suggests that artificial intelligence can help optimize healthcare resource utilization while improving patient outcomes.

The cost-effectiveness analysis demonstrating $2,340 savings per quality-adjusted life year provides strong economic justification for implementing machine learning-based prediction tools. These savings result from more targeted interventions, reduced unnecessary procedures, and improved neonatal outcomes through earlier identification of high-risk pregnancies.

Several study limitations should be acknowledged. The focus on singleton pregnancies limits applicability to multiple gestations, which represent a high-risk population for preterm birth. The requirement for fasting blood samples may limit practical implementation in some clinical settings. Additionally, the metabolomic component requires specialized laboratory capabilities that may not be available in all healthcare systems.

The biological mechanisms underlying the predictive biomarker patterns require further investigation. While inflammatory pathways clearly play important roles, the complex interactions between hormonal, placental, and metabolic factors need additional research to fully understand their contributions to preterm birth risk.

Future research directions should include investigation of intervention strategies guided by machine learning predictions, development of point-of-care testing platforms for key biomarkers, and expansion of prediction models to include additional data types such as genetic variants and environmental exposures. Long-term follow-up studies of children born to women with different predicted risk levels could provide insights into the relationship between early pregnancy biomarkers and long-term child health outcomes.

Summary and Future Perspectives

This investigation establishes machine learning analysis of maternal biomarkers as a powerful approach for early prediction of preterm birth risk, achieving accuracy levels that enable meaningful clinical implementation. The random forest algorithm's exceptional performance, combined with successful external validation and clinical integration, demonstrates the readiness of this technology for real-world deployment in prenatal care settings.

The identification of specific biomarker patterns predictive of preterm birth provides new insights into disease pathogenesis while offering targets for therapeutic intervention. The prominence of inflammatory markers supports continued research into anti-inflammatory approaches for preterm birth prevention, while the importance of hormonal and placental biomarkers validates existing therapeutic strategies and suggests opportunities for optimization.

The successful integration of machine learning predictions into clinical decision support systems represents a significant step toward precision medicine in obstetrics. The ability to stratify patients into meaningful risk categories with high accuracy enables personalized care approaches that optimize resource utilization while improving patient outcomes.

The economic benefits demonstrated through cost-effectiveness analysis provide compelling justification for healthcare system investment in artificial intelligence technologies. The combination of improved clinical outcomes and reduced costs creates a strong value proposition for machine learning implementation in prenatal care.

Clinical implementation will require careful attention to healthcare provider training, patient communication, and quality assurance processes. The development of standardized protocols for biomarker collection, analysis, and interpretation will be essential for ensuring consistent performance across different healthcare settings.

The potential for expanding these approaches to other pregnancy complications and perinatal conditions represents an exciting frontier for maternal-fetal medicine. Machine learning techniques could be applied to predict preeclampsia, fetal growth restriction, gestational diabetes, and other conditions that benefit from early identification and intervention.

Future technological advances including point-of-care biomarker testing, wearable sensor integration, and real-time risk monitoring could further enhance the clinical utility of machine learning approaches. The development of more sophisticated algorithms incorporating additional data types promises continued improvements in prediction accuracy and clinical applicability.

This research demonstrates that the intersection of advanced biomarker science and artificial intelligence offers transformative potential for improving perinatal care. Through continued investigation and clinical implementation, machine learning-based prediction tools can help reduce the global burden of preterm birth while advancing the broader goals of precision medicine in obstetrics and gynecology.

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