

Immune hydrops

Maternal–fetal blood group incompatibility, hemolysis, and fetal consequences

Etiology • Alloimmunity • Fetal pathology • Clinical consequences

Dr Abu Suraih Sakhri

MBBS, MD (Pathology)

www.abusuraihsakhri.com

Learning objectives

1

Trace maternal sensitization to fetal red-cell destruction.

2

Explain the contrasting clinical patterns of RhD and ABO incompatibility.

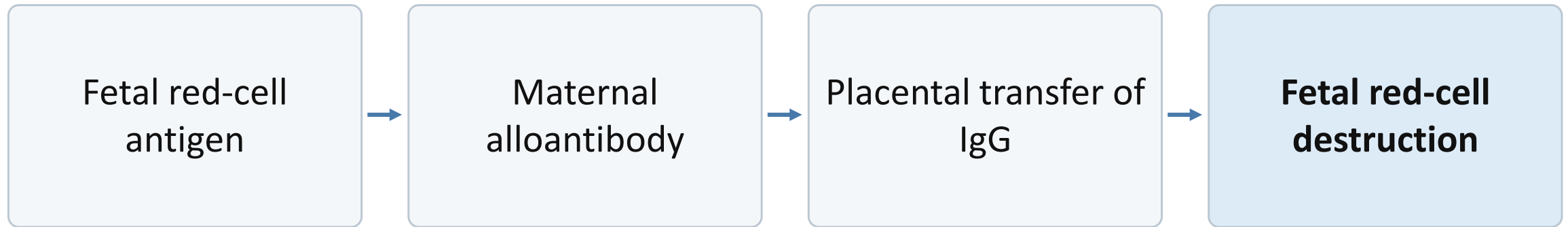
3

Connect anemia and bilirubin excess to hydrops and kernicterus.

4

Identify source-described preventive and therapeutic approaches.

Immune hydrops begins with red-cell alloimmunization



Severe fetal hemolysis can culminate in generalized fluid accumulation.

Hemolytic disease and hydrops are not synonyms

Hemolytic disease

- Maternal antibody destroys fetal or neonatal erythrocytes.
- Mild cases may be compensated without generalized edema.

Hydrops fetalis

- Severe fluid accumulation is a downstream manifestation.
- Requires sufficiently severe physiological derangement.

Fetal hydrops is pathologic fluid accumulation

Core process

Edema fluid accumulates during intrauterine development.

Most severe phenotype

Generalized fetal edema and anasarca.

Lesser fluid collections

Pleural, peritoneal, or postnuchal collections can occur.

Fluid distribution reflects disease severity

Fetal fluid accumulation

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graph TD; A[Fetal fluid accumulation] --> B[Localized]; A --> C[Postnuchal]; A --> D[Generalized]; B --> B1[Pleural or peritoneal effusion]; C --> C1[Cystic hygroma; Often a nonimmune clue]; D --> D1[Hydrops fetalis / anasarca];
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Localized

Pleural or peritoneal effusion

Postnuchal

Cystic hygroma; Often a nonimmune clue

Generalized

Hydrops fetalis / anasarca

Modern hydrops is more often nonimmune

Historically

- Rh-associated hemolytic anemia was a dominant cause.
- Maternal alloimmunization commonly affected later pregnancies.

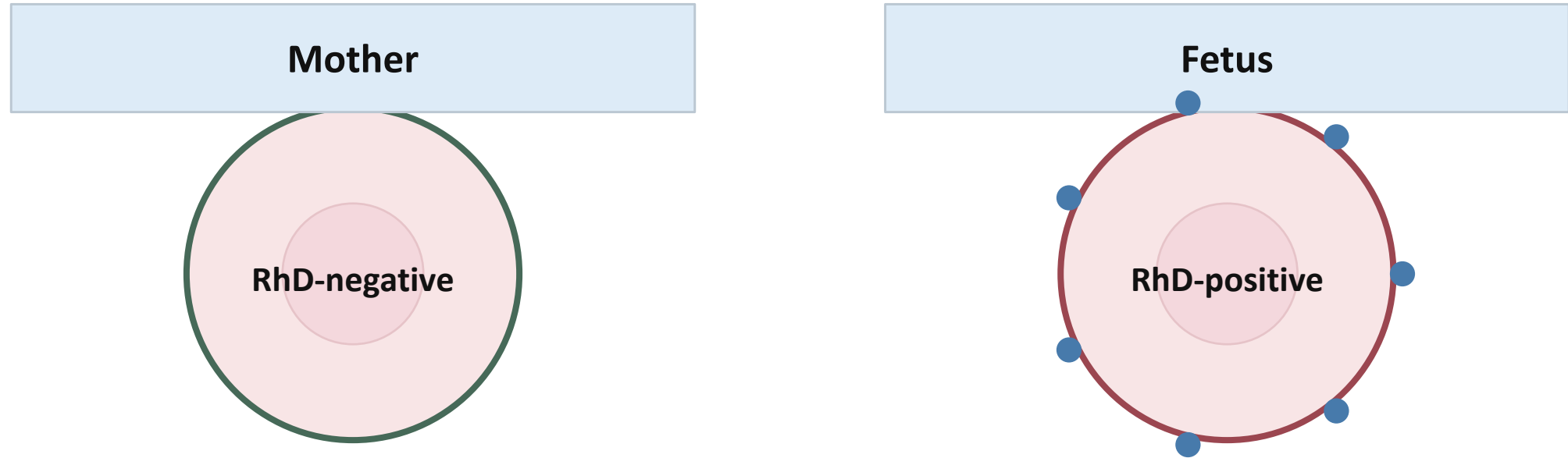
With Rh prophylaxis

- Immune hydrops has become less frequent.
- Nonimmune causes now predominate overall.

The lecture focuses on the immune pathway

Cause of hydrops	Primary mechanism	Lecture emphasis
Immune	Maternal antibodies against fetal red cells	RhD and ABO-associated hemolysis
Nonimmune	Cardiac, genetic, infectious, or other anemia mechanisms	Short differential comparison only

Antigen inheritance creates maternal–fetal mismatch



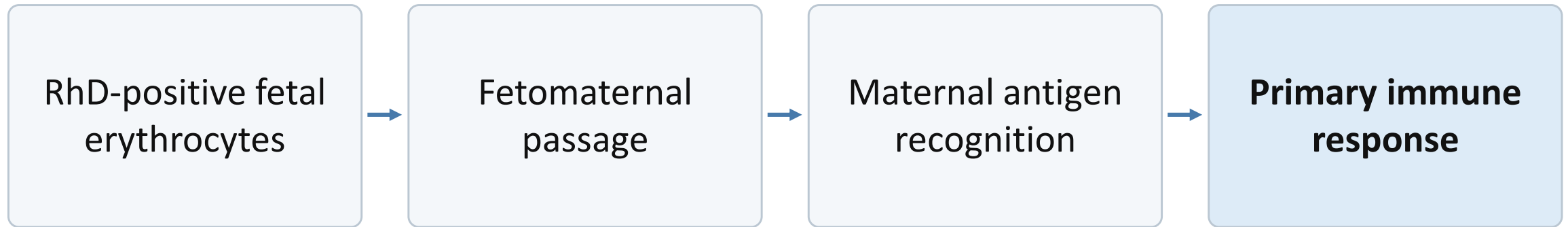
A fetus can inherit a red-cell antigen from the father that the mother lacks.

RhD is the principal Rh antigen discussed

- The Rh blood group system comprises multiple antigens.
- The D antigen as the major cause of clinically significant Rh incompatibility.
- The relevant exposure is fetal RhD-positive erythrocytes entering a RhD-negative mother.

RhD mismatch is a prerequisite for RhD alloimmunization—not proof that disease will occur.

Sensitization requires fetal cells to reach the mother



Exposure can occur before birth or during childbirth.

Maternal exposure may occur late in pregnancy

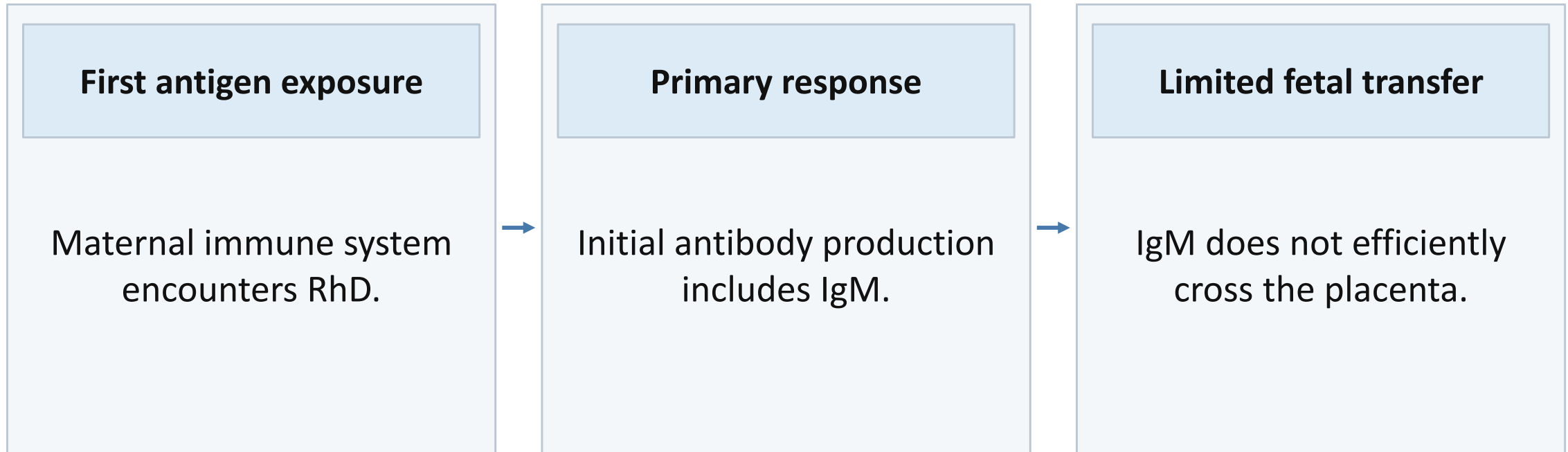
Antepartum route

- Fetal red cells can enter the maternal circulation during late pregnancy.
- The placental barrier changes with advancing gestation.

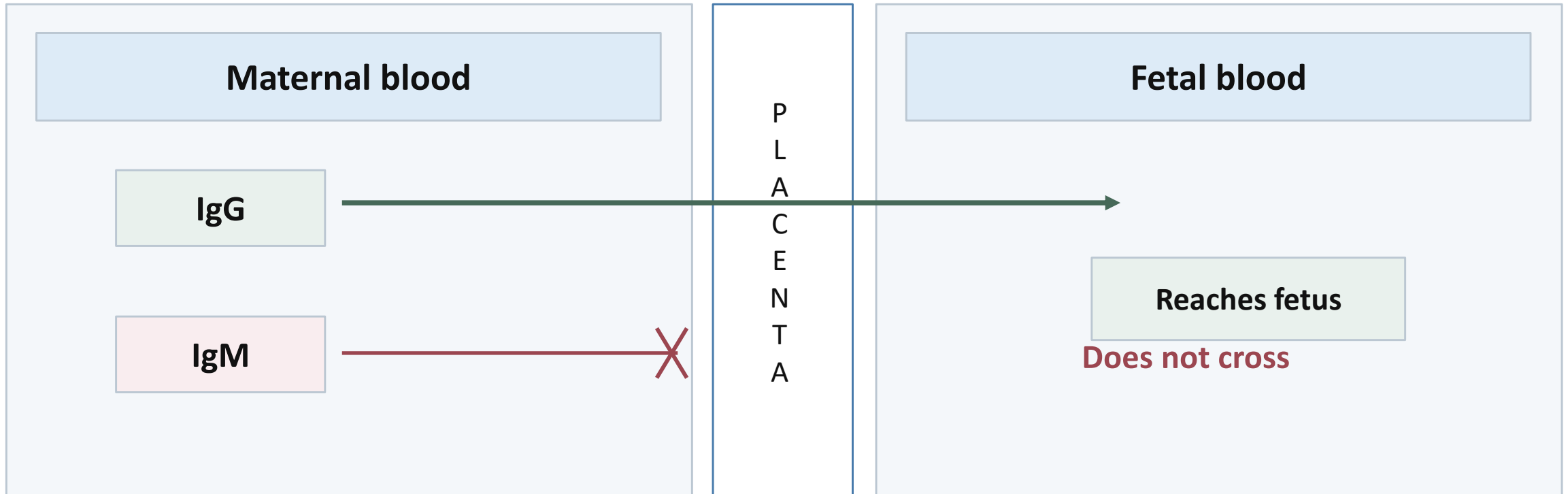
Delivery route

- Childbirth can mix fetal red cells into maternal blood.
- Exposure may sensitize the mother after the first pregnancy.

The first response is predominantly IgM

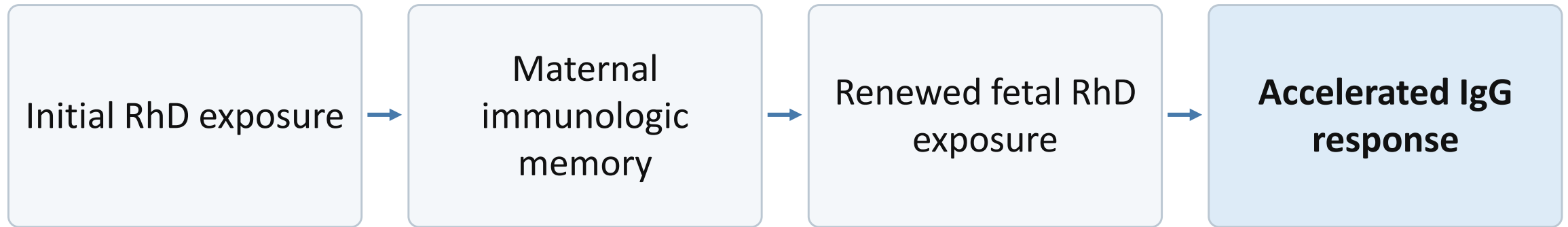


Placental transfer differs for IgM and IgG



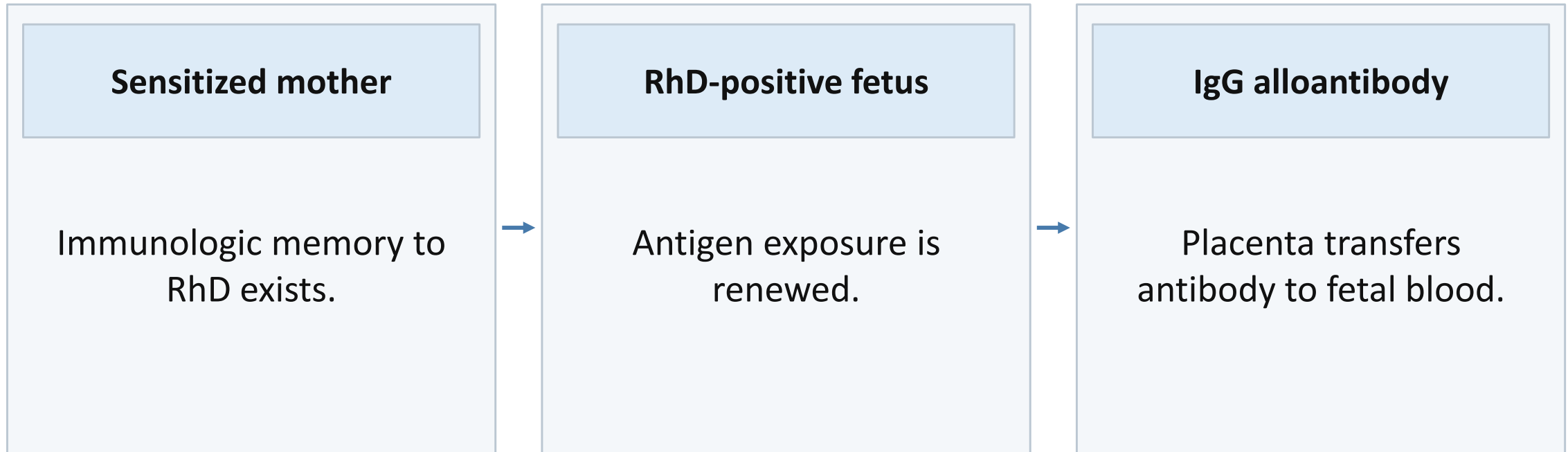
Maternal IgG can enter fetal circulation; IgM is largely excluded.

Immune memory changes a later exposure

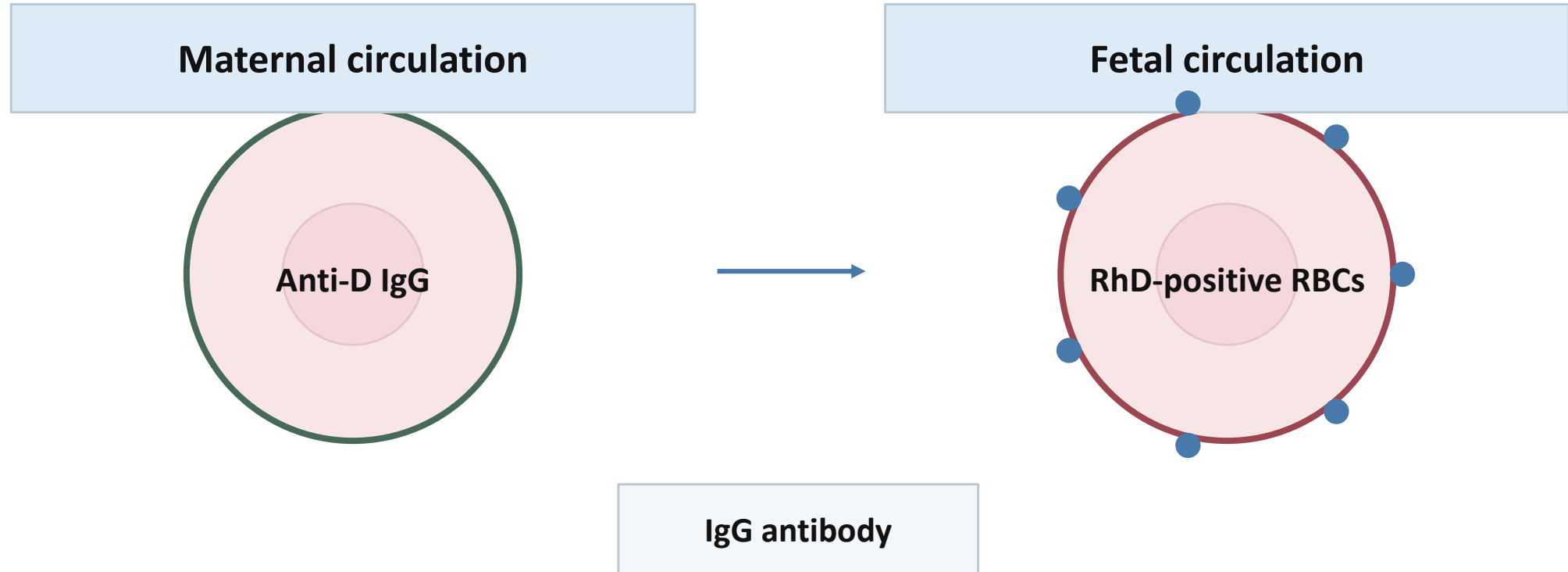


This is the classic explanation for greater RhD risk in later pregnancies.

A subsequent pregnancy can trigger brisk IgG

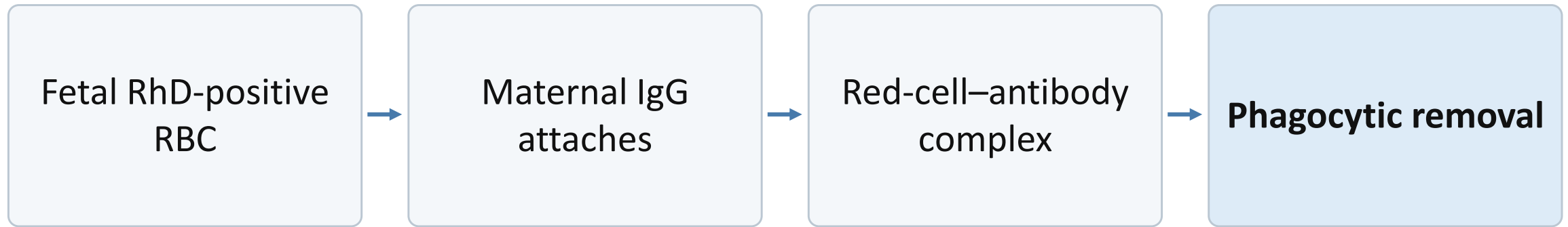


Transferred IgG binds fetal erythrocytes



The fetal red cell is recognized because it expresses the target antigen.

Antibody-coated red cells are cleared



Destruction by phagocytes following antibody attachment.

Rh hemolytic disease is a multistage process

Maternal stage	Exposure, sensitization, and IgG generation.
Placental stage	Movement of maternal IgG into fetal circulation.
Fetal stage	Red-cell clearance, anemia, and systemic consequences.

First pregnancies are relatively spared—not immune

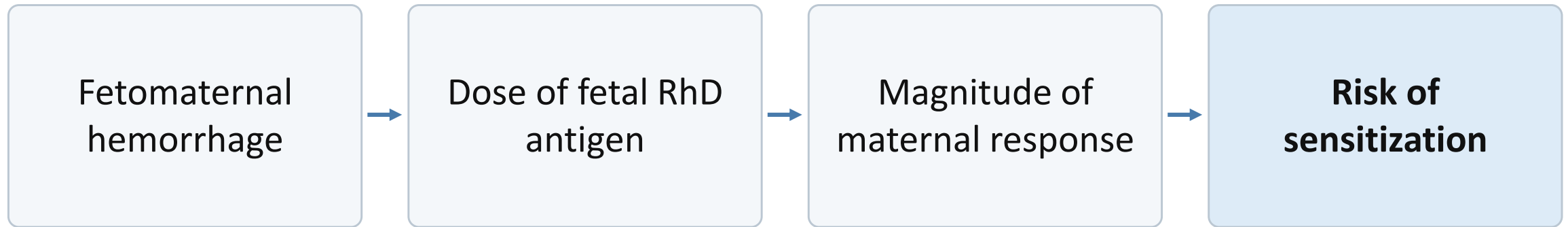
Why risk is usually lower

- Primary RhD exposure often generates IgM first.
- Sensitization commonly occurs at delivery.

Why risk is not zero

- Antigen exposure can precede delivery.
- A mother may already have been sensitized by a previous transfusion or fetal exposure.

Antigen dose modifies immunization



The Robbins excerpt links risk to immunizing antigen dose; The OCR numeric threshold was not reproduced.

ABO mismatch can reduce Rh sensitization

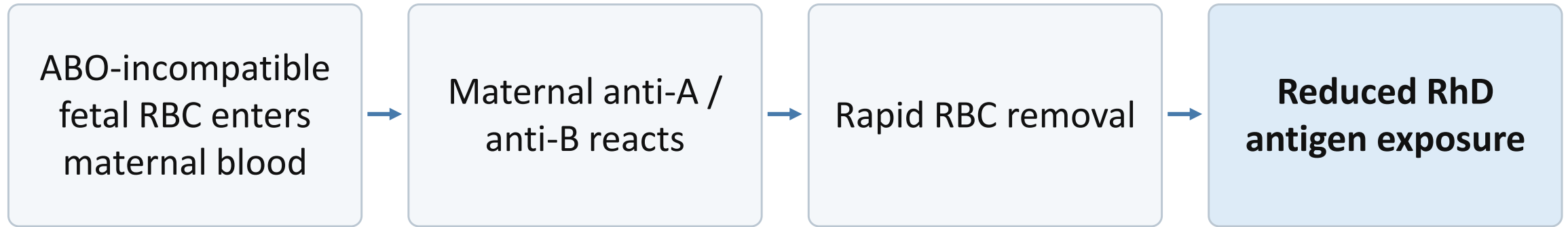
When fetal red cells carry ABO antigens

- Natural maternal anti-A or anti-B can react with incompatible cells in maternal blood.
- Those fetal cells are cleared more rapidly from maternal circulation.

Consequence for RhD

- Less persistence of RhD-positive fetal cells may reduce Rh priming.
- This protection does not imply that ABO incompatibility itself is always harmless.

The ABO protection paradox

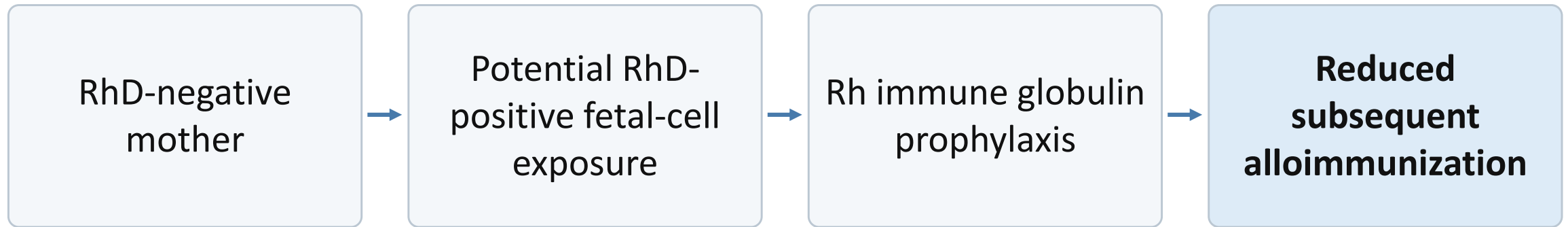


The ABO reaction occurs on fetal cells circulating in maternal blood, not by maternal IgM crossing the placenta.

Antigen mismatch is not equivalent to disease

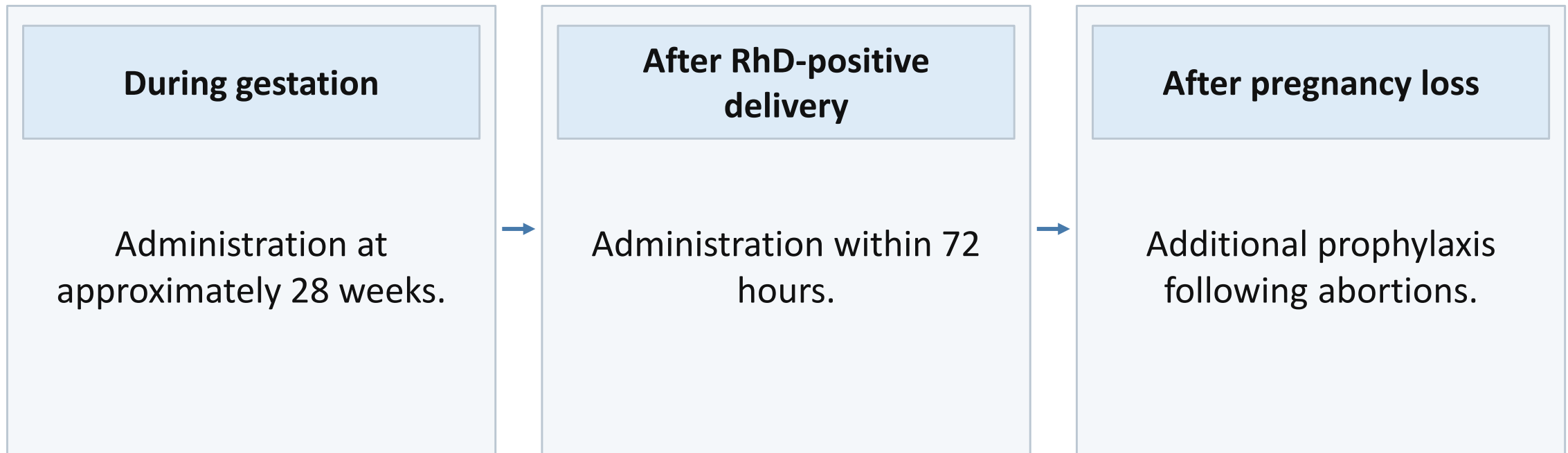
Condition	What is established	What remains uncertain
RhD incompatibility	Maternal and fetal RhD differ	Whether the mother is sensitized
RhD alloimmunization	Maternal anti-D exists	Severity of fetal hemolysis
Immune hydrops	Severe antibody-mediated fetal disease	Degree of recovery after intervention

Anti-D immune globulin prevents Rh sensitization



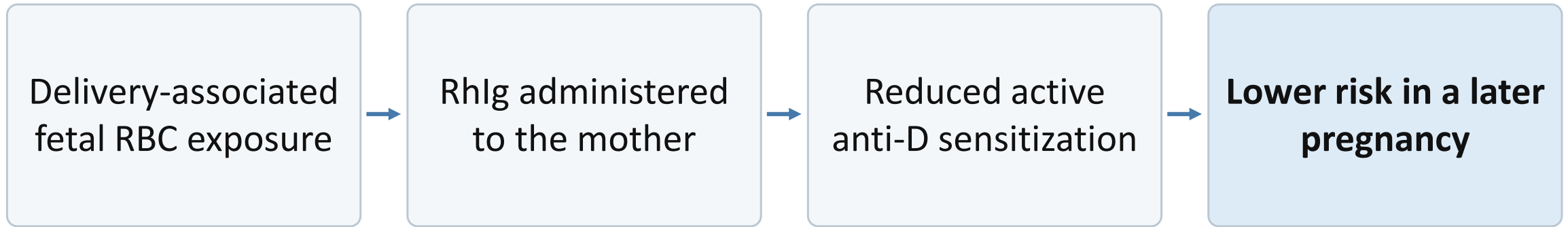
Passive anti-D prophylaxis reduces maternal sensitization risk.

Textbook RhIg schedule targets two exposure windows



The schedule shown is the described Robbins regimen; Local clinical protocols may differ.

Postpartum prophylaxis protects future pregnancies



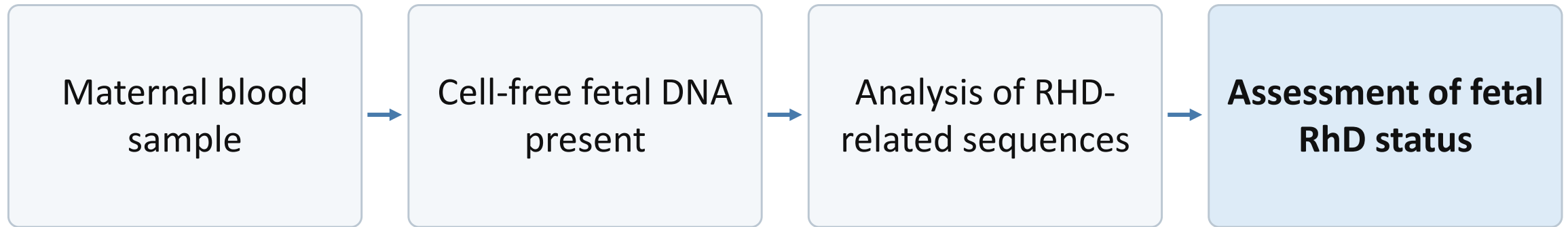
Prophylaxis does not treat established severe fetal anemia.

Other pregnancy events may also sensitize

- Pregnancy loss or abortion can expose maternal blood to fetal erythrocytes.
- Robbins specifically describes Rhlg administration after abortions.
- A previous exposure history changes the interpretation of risk in a later pregnancy.

Prevention targets maternal sensitization before clinically consequential fetal hemolysis.

Fetal Rh status can be assessed antenatally



Efforts to identify fetal Rh status using fetal DNA in maternal serum.

Invasive testing historically aided risk assessment

Source-mentioned procedure	Diagnostic role in the historical framework
Amniocentesis	Antenatal assessment of an at-risk pregnancy
Chorionic villus sampling	Fetal / placental diagnostic evaluation
Fetal blood sampling	Direct evaluation of fetal blood in selected cases

Fetal anemia is the critical treatment target

Disease mechanism

- Maternal IgG continues to drive fetal erythrocyte destruction.
- Severe anemia produces cardiocirculatory stress.

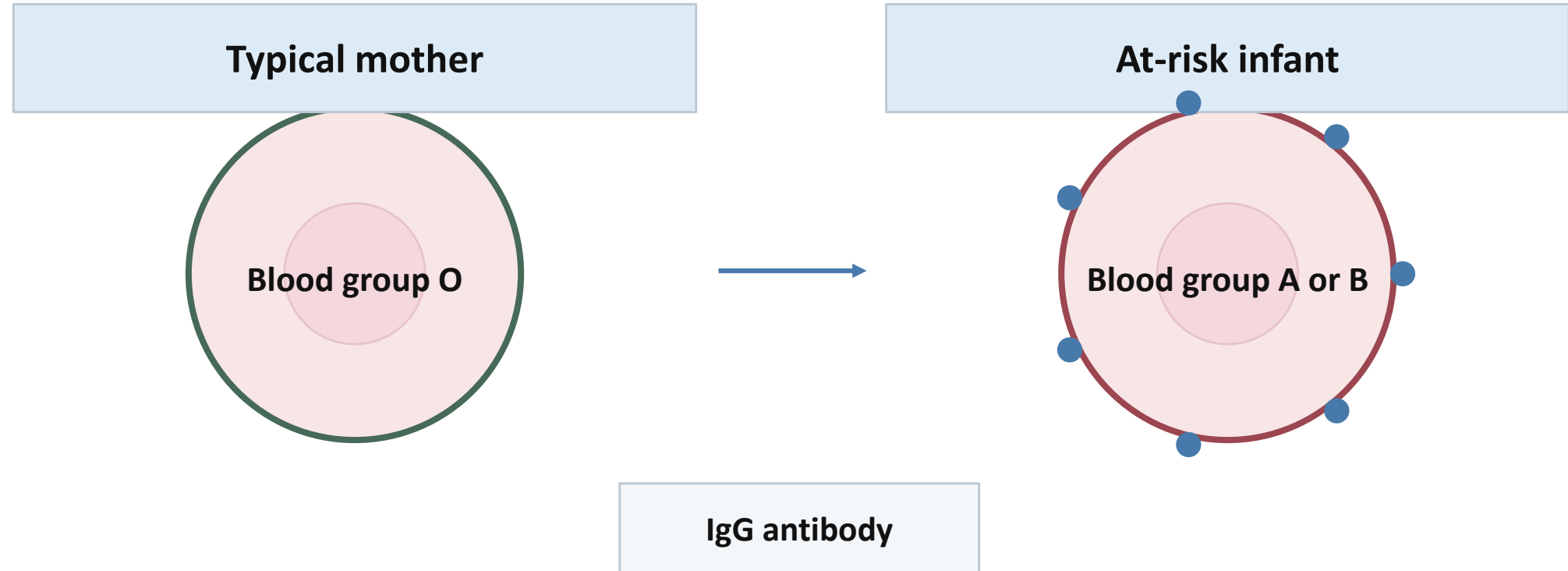
Source-described intervention

- Fetal intravascular transfusion via the umbilical cord.
- Early delivery when clinically appropriate.

Prevention and fetal treatment act at different stages

Strategy	Target	Temporal role
RhIg prophylaxis	Maternal immunization	Before immune disease becomes established
Fetal intravascular transfusion	Severe fetal anemia	During affected pregnancy
Early delivery	Continued intrauterine disease risk	Selected severe fetal cases

ABO hemolytic disease uses a different entry point



ABO-mediated neonatal hemolysis occurs predominantly in A or B infants of O mothers.

ABO disease may affect the firstborn

Before pregnancy

Some group O mothers already have IgG anti-A / anti-B.



First incompatible fetus

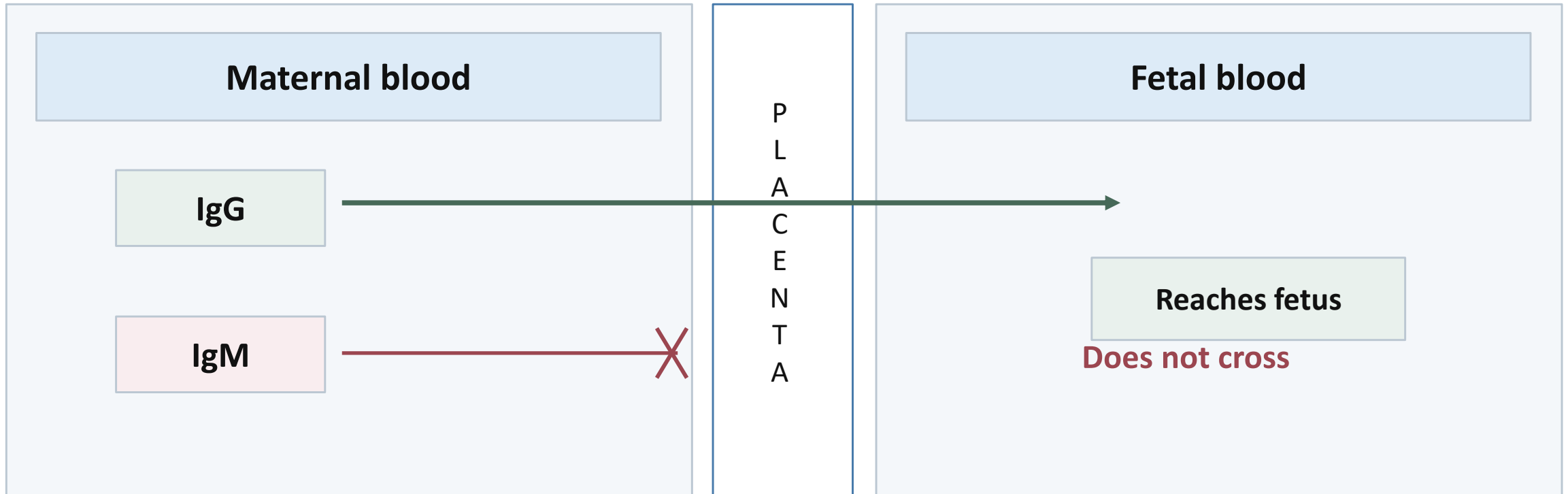
Maternal IgG reaches fetal circulation.



Neonatal hemolysis

Antibody-mediated erythrocyte clearance can occur.

Most natural ABO antibodies are IgM



Most anti-A / anti-B antibodies are IgM, limiting placental transfer; A subset of group O mothers also possess IgG.

Neonatal ABO antigen density is low

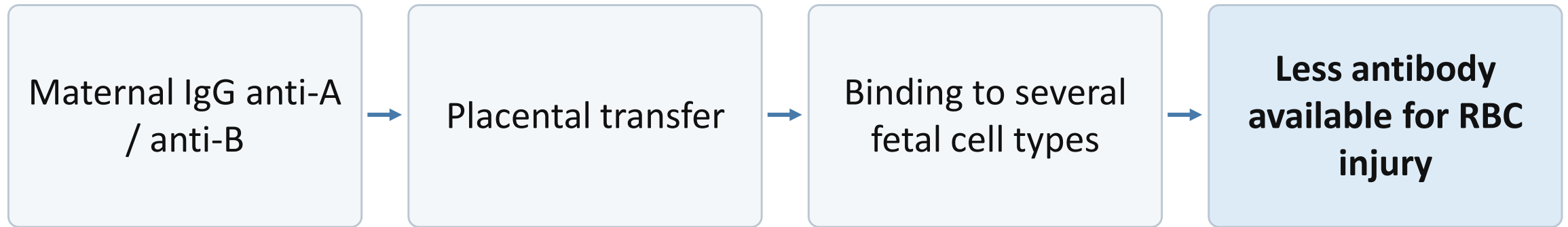
Fetal / neonatal red cells

- A and B determinants are expressed at relatively low levels.
- Less target antigen limits the intensity of antibody-mediated hemolysis.

Clinical implication

- ABO incompatibility is much more frequent than clinically severe hemolysis.
- Severe immune hydrops from ABO mismatch is unusual.

Nonerythroid ABO antigens absorb some antibodies



ABO antigens are expressed on tissues beyond erythrocytes.

Three mechanisms limit ABO disease severity

Class of antibody	Most anti-A / anti-B is IgM and cannot cross placenta.
Antigen density	Neonatal erythrocytes have relatively little A / B antigen.
Antigen distribution	Nonerythroid cells can bind some transferred antibody.

ABO mismatch is common; Severe disease is not

Textbook estimate	Interpretation
20–25% of pregnancies	ABO incompatibility
Approximately 1 in 10 incompatible infants	Hemolysis occurs
Approximately 1 in 200 incompatible cases	Hemolysis severe enough to require treatment

RhD and ABO disease: Compare the mechanisms

Feature	RhD disease	ABO disease
Typical maternal setting	RhD-negative, sensitized	Group O with anti-A / anti-B IgG
Firstborn involvement	Uncommon classically	Possible
Dominant antibodies	IgG after sensitization	Mostly IgM; relevant IgG subset
Severe hydrops	Recognized complication	Rare

A clinical distinction: Incompatible $\neq$ hemolyzed

- Blood group incompatibility only identifies a possible antigen–antibody mismatch.
- Antibody class, sensitization, and fetal antigen expression modify disease risk.
- The downstream clinical phenotype ranges from little hemolysis to severe fetal disease.

Assess the mechanism and consequences; Do not infer hydrops from blood group alone.

Hemolysis drives two major injury pathways

Excessive red-cell destruction

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graph TD; A[Excessive red-cell destruction] --> B[Reduced RBC mass]; A --> C[Heme degradation]; B --> D[Fetal anemia → organ hypoxia → hydrops]; C --> E[Unconjugated bilirubin → CNS toxicity];
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Reduced RBC mass

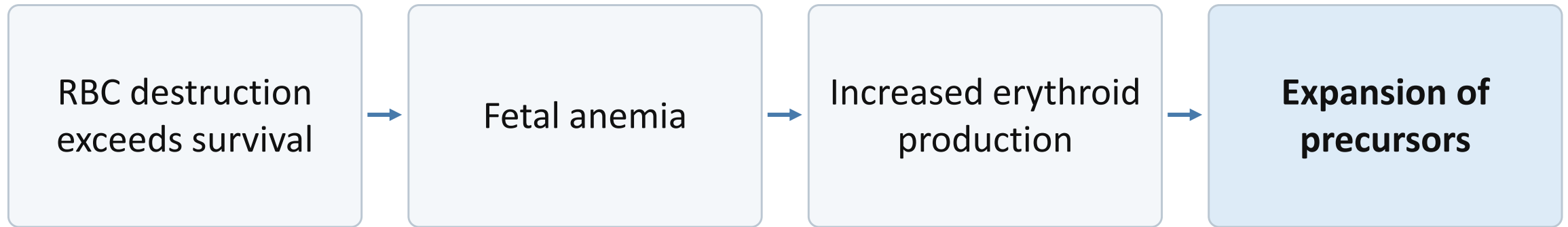
Fetal anemia → organ hypoxia → hydrops

Heme degradation

Unconjugated bilirubin → CNS toxicity

The two pathways vary independently in severity and timing.

Compensatory erythropoiesis begins with anemia



Mild hemolysis may be compensated; Severe hemolysis may outstrip production.

Erythroid compensation may preserve RBC mass

When compensation succeeds

- Higher red-cell production offsets some losses.
- Anemia may remain modest despite ongoing hemolysis.

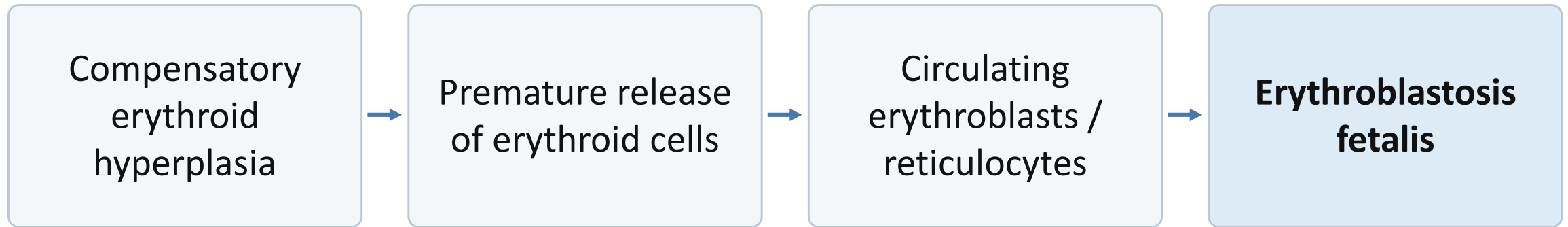
When compensation fails

- RBC destruction exceeds marrow and extramedullary output.
- Progressive anemia increases tissue hypoxia.

Extramedullary hematopoiesis has a tissue footprint

Liver	Erythroid precursor production outside marrow.
Spleen	Additional extramedullary erythropoiesis.
Other sites	Lymph nodes and occasionally kidney, lung, or heart.

Erythroblastosis fetalis describes immature RBCs



This blood finding is a response to fetal anemia; It is not exclusively immune-mediated.

Hepatosplenomegaly is mechanistically informative

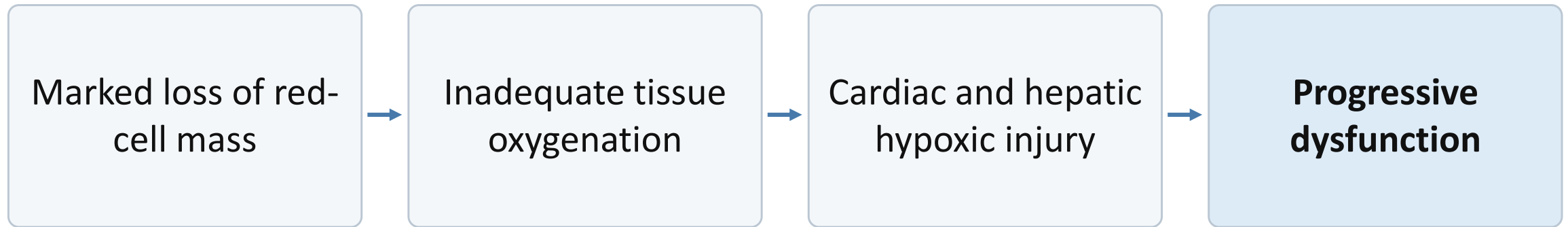
Hematopoietic response

- Expanded extramedullary erythropoiesis enlarges fetal liver and spleen.
- Immature red-cell precursors may appear in circulating blood.

Hemodynamic response

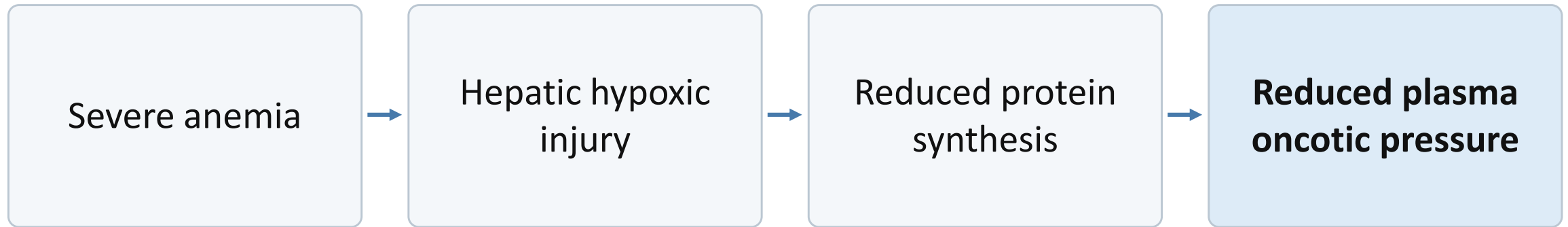
- Cardiac failure and congestion can also increase organ size.
- Both processes can coexist in severe anemia-associated hydrops.

Persistent anemia threatens oxygen delivery



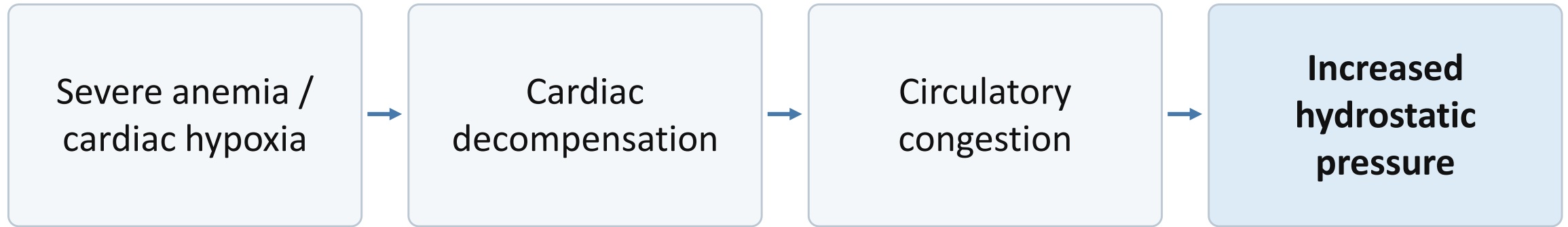
The degree of hemolysis determines how far this sequence progresses.

Liver injury lowers plasma oncotic pressure



The source contains an implausible unit for a protein concentration; Numerical value intentionally omitted.

Cardiac dysfunction raises hydrostatic pressure



Raised vascular pressure favors outward movement of fluid.

Hydrops combines two fluid-shifting forces

Hepatic injury

↓ plasma proteins

↓ oncotic pressure

Cardiac decompensation

↑ venous pressure

↑ hydrostatic pressure

```
graph TD; A[Hepatic injury] --> B[↓ plasma proteins]; B --> C[↓ oncotic pressure]; D[Cardiac decompensation] --> E[↑ venous pressure]; E --> F[↑ hydrostatic pressure]; C --> G[Generalized fetal edema / anasarca]; F --> G;
```

Generalized fetal edema / anasarca

Generalized edema is the final common phenotype

Anemia

Reduced oxygen delivery and compensatory erythropoiesis.

Organ dysfunction

Cardiac and hepatic injury affect vascular fluid balance.

Fetal phenotype

Diffuse subcutaneous and serous cavity fluid accumulation.

Anemia-associated hydrops alters fetal morphology

Fetus

- Pallor due to anemia.
- Hepatosplenomegaly with congestion and hematopoiesis.

Placenta

- Placental pallor is described in severe fetal anemia-associated hydrops.
- Morphologic appearance alone does not establish an immune cause.

A marrow response supports anemia-associated hydrops

Expected response

- Compensatory erythroid precursor hyperplasia.
- Extramedullary hematopoiesis can accompany severe anemia.

Important exception

- Parvovirus B19 may damage erythroid precursors.
- Marrow red-cell aplasia is therefore a nonimmune differential clue.

Disease spectrum depends on hemolytic burden

Milder hemolysis

Compensation; Pallor $\pm$
organomegaly.



Progressive fetal anemia

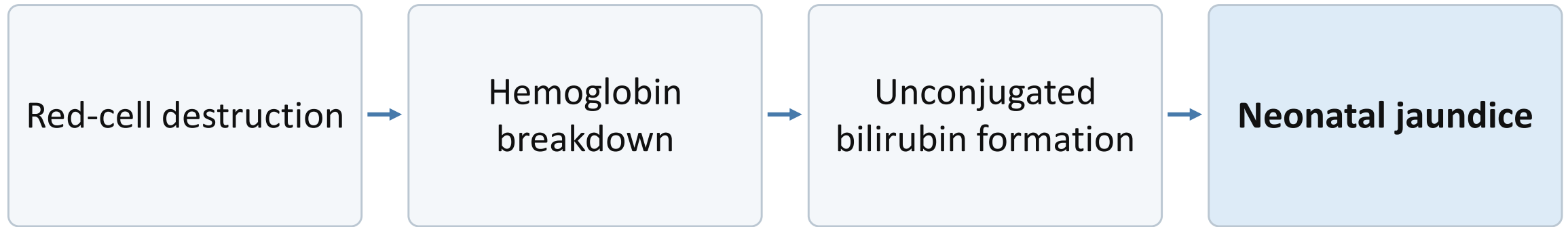
Hypoxic stress and
worsening dysfunction.



Severe disease

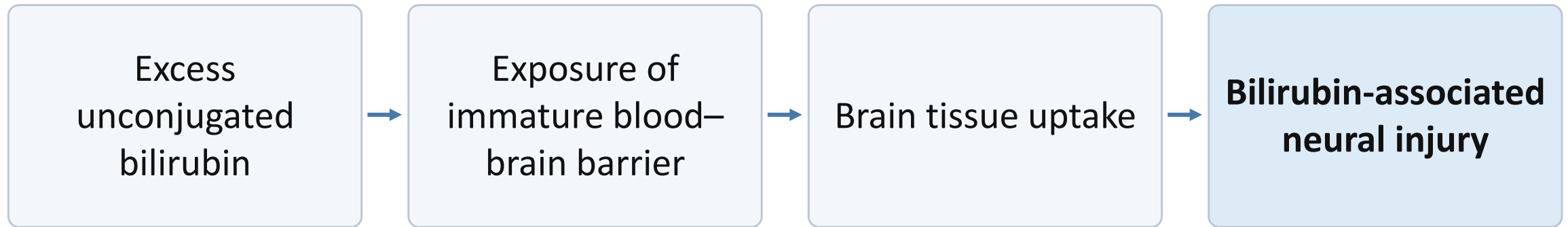
Anasarca, intense jaundice
after birth, neurologic risk.

Hemoglobin catabolism produces bilirubin



Bilirubin production increases when erythrocyte destruction accelerates.

Unconjugated bilirubin can injure the immature CNS



Clinical neonatal timing and bilirubin handling differ from the intrauterine period.

Kernicterus has a characteristic CNS distribution

Deep gray nuclei	Basal ganglia and thalamus may appear yellow.
Other susceptible sites	Cerebellum, cerebral gray matter, spinal cord described.
Consequences	Serious bilirubin-associated central nervous system damage.

Prematurity increases bilirubin vulnerability

Term neonate

- A higher typical bilirubin threshold for kernicterus.
- The precise individual injury threshold is unpredictable.

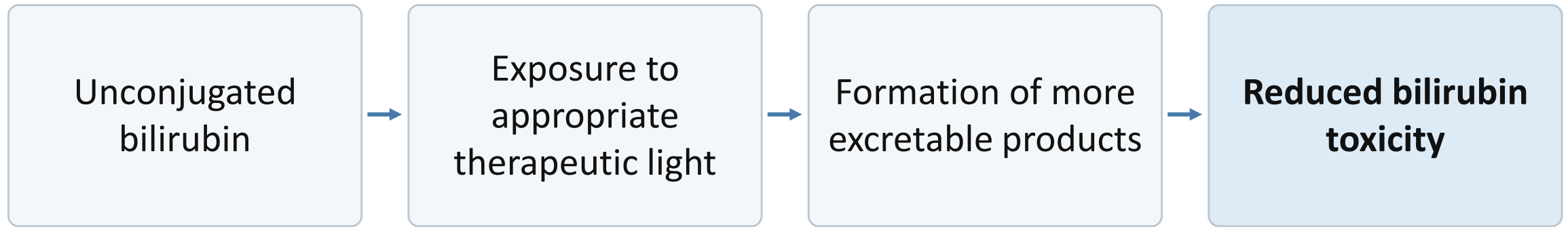
Premature neonate

- Neural toxicity may occur at lower bilirubin levels.
- Gestational maturity therefore modifies risk.

Clinical features mirror the two injury pathways

Dominant process	Clinical manifestation	Mechanistic explanation
Red-cell loss	Pallor / anemia	Decreased erythrocyte mass
Compensation / congestion	Hepatosplenomegaly	Hematopoiesis and circulatory changes
Severe fetal organ stress	Generalized edema	Low oncotic + high hydrostatic forces
Bilirubin excess	Jaundice / neurologic injury	Unconjugated bilirubin toxicity

Phototherapy addresses neonatal bilirubin excess



This is neonatal management of hyperbilirubinemia, not prophylaxis of maternal Rh sensitization.

Exchange transfusion treats severe neonatal disease

Treatment indication in principle

- Severe hemolytic hyperbilirubinemia in a neonate.
- Risk of serious bilirubin-related neurologic toxicity.

Source-mentioned action

- Exchange transfusion in severe cases.
- Specialist management rather than routine response to blood-group mismatch.

Prevention and rescue target separate mechanisms

Clinical stage	Main pathology target	Source-described approach
Before maternal sensitization	Prevent maternal anti-D formation	Rh immune globulin
Severe intrauterine disease	Restore fetal red-cell mass	Umbilical intravascular transfusion
Severe neonatal bilirubin disease	Limit bilirubin toxicity	Phototherapy; exchange transfusion

Immune and nonimmune hydrops must be separated

Cause class	Examples	Shared final phenotype
Immune	RhD and ABO antibodies	Fetal edema $\pm$ anemia
Nonimmune cardiac	Structural defects; fetal arrhythmias	Cardiac failure and edema
Nonimmune genetic	45,X; trisomy 21 or 18	Cardiac or lymphatic abnormalities
Nonimmune anemia	α -thalassemia; parvovirus B19	Severe fetal anemia and edema

Case application: A sensitized RhD-negative mother

Illustrative teaching vignette

A previously sensitized RhD-negative mother carries a RhD-positive fetus. Severe fetal anemia develops.

Which maternal immunoglobulin produces fetal red-cell destruction?

Anti-D IgG can cross the placenta and bind fetal RhD-positive erythrocytes.

IgM is produced in a primary response but ordinarily does not cross the placenta.

Case application: ABO disease in a firstborn

Illustrative teaching vignette

A group O mother delivers a firstborn infant with group A blood and neonatal jaundice.

Why is firstborn hemolysis possible in this setting?

Some group O mothers have preexisting IgG anti-A / anti-B antibodies.

ABO disease need not depend on pregnancy-induced Rh-type sensitization.

Case application: From anemia to anasarca

Illustrative teaching vignette

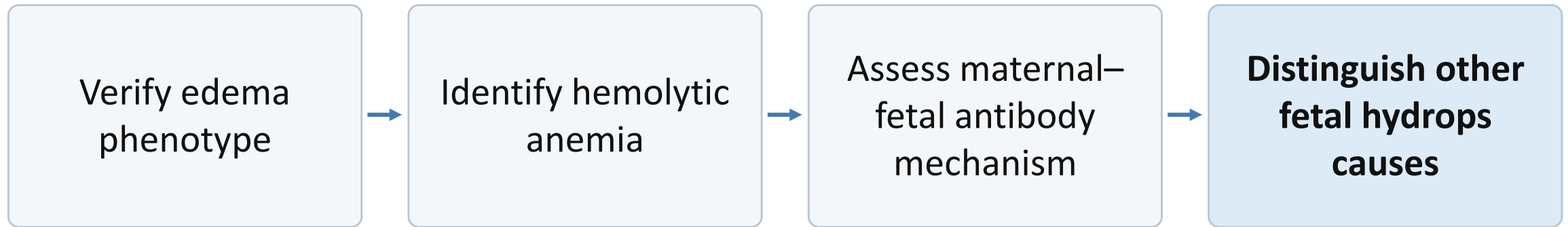
A fetus with marked antibody-mediated anemia develops liver dysfunction, cardiac failure, and generalized edema.

Identify the two forces favoring edema.

Reduced plasma oncotic pressure and increased circulatory hydrostatic pressure.

Hepatic impairment lowers protein synthesis; Cardiac failure causes congestion.

Read a hydrops presentation as a mechanism



This is a reasoning schematic from the textbook discussion—not a comprehensive clinical guideline.

Five high-yield conclusions

Cause	Maternal IgG can mediate fetal erythrocyte destruction.
Difference	RhD often requires sensitization; ABO may affect a firstborn.
Consequence	Anemia drives fetal hydrops; Bilirubin excess threatens neonatal CNS.
Prevention	RhIg reduces maternal RhD sensitization.
Treatment	Severe fetal anemia and neonatal jaundice require distinct strategies.

Reference and source boundaries

Robbins, Cotran & Kumar. Pathologic Basis of Disease. 11th ed. (2026). Chapter 10: Diseases of Infancy and Childhood, pp. 419–422.

Primary section: “Immune Hydrops”; surrounding sections: “Fetal Hydrops,” “Nonimmune Hydrops,” “Morphology,” and “Clinical Features.”

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