



Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy for the Prevention and Treatment of Delayed Neurological Sequelae after Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

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Abstract

Carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning remains a prevalent medical emergency with potentially fatal outcomes. Long-term neurological consequences, known as delayed neurological sequelae (DNS), may manifest several days to weeks following the acute exposure. Hyperbaric oxygen (HBO₂) has appeared as a valuable intervention in severe cases, enhancing the CO dissociation from hemoglobin and aiding tissue oxygenation. Recent case studies and clinical reports suggest that HBO₂ not only reduces the severity of acute CO poisoning but also plays a critical role in preventing and treating DNS, leading to improvements in neurocognitive function. The article aims to describe DNS and discuss the demonstrated benefits of HBO₂ in the treatment and prevention of neurological sequelae, emphasizing its potential to enhance recovery and reduce long-term neurological damage.

Keywords: carbon monoxide poisoning, Hyperbaric oxygen therapy, delayed neurological sequelae, prevention, DNS

Introduction

Carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning is one of the prevalent medical emergencies which could result in fatal outcomes. It is a poisonous gas that can be produced endogenously by the breakdown of heme-protein and exogenously by the incomplete combustion of carbon-fueled substances¹. In Thailand,

common sources of carbon monoxide are forest fires, biomass burning, motor vehicles, fuel combustion, and some industries with inadequate ventilation systems²⁻⁴. CO has been termed a "silent killer" due to its colorless, tasteless, odorless, and non-irritant properties¹.

Confusion, dizziness, nausea, abdominal pain, chest pain, and dyspnea are some of

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the immediate symptoms of CO poisoning⁵. Carboxyhemoglobin (COHb) levels do not always correlate with the severity of symptoms, as various factors influence the clinical outcome⁶. However, COHb levels above 50% are considered lethal and can lead to severe symptoms such as coma, convulsions, respiratory distress, and even death^{7,9}. In CO poisoning, patients often suffer from long term psychoneurological consequences that may appear immediately after exposure and continue over time, referred to as persistent neurological sequelae (PNS). In some cases, symptoms can arise days to weeks after the initial recovery phase, known as delayed neurological sequelae (DNS), which generally result in worse clinical outcomes compared to PNS¹⁰. The incidence of DNS varies from one study to another but is typically reported in about 6 - 40% of survivors of acute CO poisoning¹¹⁻¹⁵. These symptoms can occur 2 days to 6 weeks after recovery from the injury¹⁵⁻¹⁸. Although some cases have been reported as late as 8 months, they typically appear within 20 days^{5,8}.

A non-rebreathing face mask with 100 percent normobaric oxygen (NBO) is the standard therapy for acute CO poisoning¹⁹⁻²⁰. For patients with severe acute carbon monoxide poisoning, hyperbaric oxygen (HBO₂) is frequently suggested²¹. Although several studies have shown that HBO₂ improves clinical outcomes and may reduce DNS more than NBO in CO poisoning patients, there are currently debates about using HBO₂ for CO poisoning treatment and its potential benefit in preventing the development of DNS²².

≡ Mechanism of CO Poisoning ≡ and Development of DNS

CO is estimated to have a 240-fold higher affinity for hemoglobin than oxygen, creating a compound known as carboxyhemoglobin (COHb)²³. As a result, there is less hemoglobin in the blood that can carry oxygen, resulting in tissue hypoxia. CO also binds to myoglobin and mitochondrial cytochrome oxidase, limiting mitochondrial respiration and interrupting oxygen transportation especially in the heart and brain⁶. This process decreases ATP production and disrupts the electron transport chain, leading to an influx of calcium ions into cells that worsens brain damage. Furthermore, CO induces reactive oxygen species (ROS) and nitric oxide production, causing oxidative stress. CO also stimulates platelet and neutrophil-endothelial adhesion, which results in the release of inflammatory mediators¹⁷. These inflammatory mediators and ROS lead to lipid peroxidation, particularly in the brain. This mechanism, which causes neuronal damage, is expected to have a considerable impact on the development of DNS by converting myelin basic protein (MBP) into adduct formation^{6,24}. This alteration increases MBP's vulnerability to proteases, disrupts antibody recognition, triggers adaptive immune responses, and contributes to CO-induced delayed demyelination. This process begins after exposure to CO and continues during the lucid interval, a phase where patients show no noticeable neuropsychiatric symptoms or white matter changes on MRI scans. Once demyelination surpasses a critical threshold,

white matter alterations occur, MBP levels elevate, and neuropsychiatric symptoms of DNS emerge²⁵. Furthermore, some authors have suggested that DNS development may be influenced by factors aside from demyelination, such as excessive activation of glial cells, inflammatory responses triggered by astrocytes, and dysfunction of oligodendrocytes²⁵⁻²⁶.

Diagnosis of DNS

Although previous studies have revealed various clinical symptoms of DNS, there are currently no standard diagnostic criteria. DNS was frequently diagnosed based on the history of CO exposure, a thorough neurological examination, clinical symptoms, and consultation with a neurologist or psychiatrist²⁷⁻²⁸.

DNS is difficult to diagnose because of the lucid intervals that range from days to weeks; also, various illnesses might resemble DNS presentations¹². DNS symptoms include altered awareness, cognitive decline, difficulty concentrating, urine incontinence, parkinsonism, seizures, peripheral neuropathies, psychosis, changes in personality, depression, insomnia, loss of memory, and anxiety^{21,29-30}. The Mini-Mental State Examination (MMSE) or other psycho-cognitive test is commonly used to assess disorientation and cognitive impairment^{12,14-15}.

Imaging studies and Prognostic Factors

During acute CO poisoning, no clinical signs or reliable predictors can help physicians identify which patients will develop DNS.

However, the findings of a computerized tomography scan (CT-scan) and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) might assist in the diagnosis of DNS^{12,18}. One of the prognostic indicators of DNS that can be seen by CT-scan in the acute phase is cerebral edema. When a CT scan reveals diffuse cerebral edema at an early stage, the prognosis is poor¹⁷. Diffusion-weighted magnetic resonance imaging (DW-MRI) is one of the most sensitive and highly effective at early detection of acute ischemic brain lesions and CO-induced hypoxia. They can identify CO-related cytotoxic edema if performed within 72 hours of exposure, aiding early diagnosis of delayed DNS³¹. A meta-analysis of eight trials found that DNS could be diagnosed using MRI with 71% sensitivity and 85% specificity¹⁸. Typically, gray matter is more susceptible to cerebral hypoxia than white matter. However, during acute CO poisoning, pathological changes were observed in the white matter, while the adjacent gray matter showed few alterations¹⁷. Globus pallidus is one of the locations that is sensitive to hypoxia after carbon monoxide poisoning¹⁸. Symmetrical hyperintensities in the bilateral globus pallidus, cerebral white matter demyelination, cerebral atrophy, and hippocampus, thalamic, and basal ganglia abnormalities are typical MRI findings associated with DNS³⁰⁻³². However, no official agreement on the results of an MRI associated with DNS was made.

Currently, there are no reliable predictors of DNS. Many studies have proposed predictive factors for DNS such as Glasgow coma score^{12,33},

CO exposure duration³⁴, time to HBOT after CO exposure³⁴, carboxyhemoglobin level¹⁵, abnormal findings on MRI³³, QTc prolongation on electrocardiogram³⁵, and creatinine kinase level^{12,14,36} but none are conclusive. Therefore, individuals suffering from CO poisoning should be regularly observed, warned about the danger of developing DNS, and screened for neurocognitive sequelae 4 - 6 weeks following CO injury¹⁹.

=====The Role of HBO₂=====

in Prevention of DNS

Hyperbaric oxygen (HBO₂) is a medical procedure in which the patient's entire body is placed inside a hyperbaric chamber while breathing medical-grade oxygen (> 99% purity) at a pressure not less than 2.0 ATA., with most clinical treatments using a pressure between 2.0 and 3.0 ATA⁶. HBO₂ assists in the dissociation of CO from hemoglobin and the transport of oxygen to tissues. When a patient breathes air at sea level, the half-life of COHb is approximately 5 hours. With administration of HBO₂ at 3 ATA, the half-life of COHb decreases to around 30 minutes. HBO₂ also provides several actions that relieve central nervous system (CNS) damage and prevent the development of DNS. It provides a protective oxidative stress response through the upregulation of heme oxygenase and antioxidant enzymes¹⁷. Furthermore, HBO₂ decreases leukocyte adhesion to endothelial cells, cytotoxic neurotransmitters, alteration in myelin protein structure, immune-mediated

damage, lipid peroxidation, and neuronal apoptosis, all of which are postulated pathways for DNS following CO exposure^{6,24}.

Over the last few decades, there is an ongoing discussion over how HBO₂ prevents the development of neurocognitive sequelae. While some research contends that HBO₂ does not improve the outcome, many studies have demonstrated that HBO₂ can decrease the chance of developing DNS more than normobaric oxygen³⁷⁻³⁸.

According to a 2018 meta-analysis that evaluated the data from 6 RCTs, patients who receive HBO₂ treatment after CO poisoning have less neurocognitive symptoms such as memory loss, headache, concentration problems, sleep disturbances, and lower incidence of DNS than those who receive NBO treatment³⁷. A large-scale observational study (n = 2,034) by Nakajima et al. also found that patients who received HBO₂ within one day of admission had lower rates of depressed mental status at discharge than those who did not receive HBO₂ (n = 4,701)³⁸.

In contrast, research by Han et al. that followed 224 patients for six months, DNS incidence was not significantly different between individuals treated for acute CO poisoning with HBO₂ and those treated with normobaric oxygen (NBO)³⁹. A similar conclusion was drawn from another large-scale study in Japan, which noted no notable difference in DNS incidence between the HBO₂ and NBO groups (3.6% vs. 7.6%). However, this study had inconsistent HBO₂ protocols and

did not involve patients with minor neurological symptoms which could possibly affect the outcome¹³. Furthermore, there's evidence indicating that more HBO₂ sessions might increase the chances of developing DNS²⁸.

Moreover, the optimum session of HBO₂ for CO poisoning patients is not universally agreed upon. Numerous research studies have examined the most effective HBO₂ protocols for the best neurological outcomes.

In a study by Weaver et al., it was demonstrated that receiving 3 HBO₂ sessions within 24 hours appeared to lower the likelihood of neurocognitive sequelae at six and twelve months following acute carbon monoxide poisoning⁴⁰. However, there were no significant improvements in cognitive sequelae at one month following CO poisoning between patients who received single session and multiple-session (two or three sessions) of HBO₂, based on a recent study in 2023⁴¹. Wang et al.'s meta-analysis also reported that 2 HBO₂ sessions might not be more advantageous for memory loss than 1 HBO₂ session⁴².

The optimal therapeutic pressure used also differs among the studies, ranging from 2.0 - 3.0 ATA^{13,42}. According to several publications, HBO₂ treatment does not have any positive benefits at therapeutic pressures lower than 2.5 ATA. Based on a study by Thom et al., HBO₂ at 2.8 - 3.0 ATA can inhibit neutrophil adhesion to brain endothelial cells leading to prevention of CO-mediated brain lipid peroxidation, which is an important

mechanism that leads to development of DNS. At all events, HBO₂ therapy should be administered without delay, ideally within 24 hours after being exposed CO^{40,43-44}.

==== The Role of HBO₂ ==== in Treatment of DNS

For the treatment of DNS, the role of HBO₂ in DNS remains inconclusive as well. The proposed mechanism of HBO₂ for treating DNS includes reducing oligodendrocyte injury, promoting the remyelination of axons in white matter, stimulating differentiation of precursor cell⁴⁵. It could be related to transferring mitochondria to the injury site, producing anti-inflammatory cytokines, protecting blood-brain barrier integrity, and promoting neurogenesis, as seen in animal models⁴⁶. Several case reports have shown that HBO₂ is beneficial for treating patients who have been diagnosed with DNS^{16,45,47}.

A case report by Tapeantong et al. indicated that a patient who developed DNS four weeks after recovering from the acute phase of CO poisoning experienced improvements in memory, cognitive functions, and significant reduction of brain white matter lesions on MRI after HBO₂⁴⁸. Furthermore, a recent study by Wong et al. reported a case of a patient who developed severe neurological symptoms resembling Parkinsonism eight weeks after CO poisoning, with MRI findings consistent with hypoxic-ischaemic encephalopathy. After 20 sessions of HBO₂ at 2.0 ATA and intravenous methylprednisolone,

the patient remarkably fully recovered and was able to return to work without recurrence⁴⁷. Similarly, Martini et al. reported successful outcomes in two DNS patients who underwent 21 - 24 sessions of HBO₂ at 2.5 ATA alongside anti-inflammatory drugs and rehabilitation, though the effectiveness may have been influenced by the use of adjunctive treatments such as corticosteroids and acetylcysteine¹⁶. Liao et al. study also found that early HBO₂ significantly decreased the symptoms of DNS in patients after being exposed to CO, and the benefits of the treatment persisted for a year following DNS diagnosis⁴⁵.

To determine whether HBO₂ is an effective treatment for DNS, larger studies are needed. These studies should ideally include controlled trials with larger sample sizes to provide more reliable data.

Conclusion

Hyperbaric oxygen therapy (HBO₂) holds potential as a therapeutic intervention for the prevention and treatment of DNS, a condition that commonly manifests weeks after CO exposure. In severe cases, such as those involving loss of consciousness or COHb levels exceeding 25%, early HBO₂ administration is recommended, followed by ongoing evaluation of psychocognitive symptoms. Although recent studies have highlighted the benefits of HBO₂, its use remains debatable due to inconsistencies in research results, which may arise from variations in HBO₂ protocols, exclusion of certain patient groups, and differences in treatment duration or pressure. To reach definitive conclusions and improve patient outcomes, especially in severe cases, standardized research methodologies are urgently needed.

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