UDC: 616.155–07:616.831–005.4–092

COMPARISON OF IRON-DEFICIENCY, MEGALOBLASTIC, AND HEMOLYTIC ANEMIA IN TERMS OF THEIR EFFECTS ON CEREBRAL PERFUSION AND COGNITIVE FUNCTION. LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Anemias of various origins exert significant effects on cerebral blood flow and cognitive function. Iron-deficiency anemia (IDA), megaloblastic anemia (MA), and hemolytic anemia (HA) differ in their pathophysiological mechanisms but converge at a common endpoint — impaired neuronal oxygenation and reduced cerebral perfusion. In IDA, the key pathogenic factor is iron deficiency, which impairs hemoglobin synthesis and cytochrome function, resulting in neuronal hypoxia and energy failure. MA is primarily associated with vitamin B_{12} and folate deficiency, leading to DNA methylation failure and demyelination. HA, on the other hand, is characterized by chronic hemolysis, anemic hypoxia, and elevated free bilirubin, which induce oxidative stress and endothelial injury. All three types of anemia are linked to decreased cerebral blood flow, hippocampal and cortical dysfunction, and cognitive deficits involving attention, memory, and executive function. This review summarizes and compares current data on how these types of anemia affect cerebral perfusion and cognition, including evidence from neuroimaging and neuropsychological studies.

KEY WORDS: iron-deficiency anemia, megaloblastic anemia, hemolytic anemia, cerebral perfusion, cognitive function, hypoxia, neuro-metabolism, vitamin B_{12} deficiency, oxidative stress.

INTRODUCTION

Anemia is a pathological condition defined by a reduction in hemoglobin concentration and/or red blood cell count, leading to decreased oxygen delivery to tissues. According to the World Health Organization, more than 24% of the global population is affected by anemia, and among women of reproductive age and the elderly, the prevalence reaches 40% [WHO, 2023, p. 12].

The most clinically significant forms of anemia—iron-deficiency (IDA), megaloblastic (MA), and hemolytic (HA)—differ in etiology but share similar consequences for the central nervous system (CNS). The major outcome is cerebral hypoxia, resulting in metabolic and functional disturbances within neurons, particularly in oxygen-sensitive regions such as the hippocampus, frontal lobes, and cerebellum [Gavrilova, 2021, p. 78].

Recent neuroimaging research demonstrates that all types of anemia cause a decrease in cerebral perfusion, as observed by functional MRI, and alter neuronal network connectivity in brain regions responsible for attention and memory [Singh, 2019, p. 133]. Cognitive deficits include decreased concentration, slowed processing speed, and impaired memory [Poliakova, 2020, p. 45].

The purpose of this review is to conduct a comparative analysis of these three types of anemia, focusing on their pathophysiological effects on cerebral perfusion and cognitive performance, to identify shared and specific mechanisms, and to synthesize the findings of contemporary literature in a structured format.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Iron-Deficiency Anemia and Cerebral Blood Flow

Iron-deficiency anemia is the most prevalent type of anemia and results from insufficient iron required for hemoglobin and cytochrome synthesis [Lozoff, 2018, p. 210]. Iron deficiency leads to impaired tissue oxygenation and altered cerebral energy metabolism. Experimental studies demonstrate that iron deficiency decreases cytochrome oxidase activity and ATP levels in neurons [Beard, 2019, p. 48].

Neuroimaging studies have shown reduced regional cerebral blood flow in the frontal cortex and hippocampus in IDA patients [Huang, 2020, p. 116]. These changes are associated with impaired myelination and reduced gray matter volume [Xu, 2019, p. 303]. Clinically, IDA manifests as cognitive sluggishness, diminished attention span, and reduced information processing speed [Poliakova, 2020, p. 49].

Iron also plays a critical role in the synthesis of neurotransmitters such as dopamine, serotonin, and GABA. Therefore, iron deficiency often results in apathy, decreased motivation, and depression [Beard, 2019, p. 53].

2. Megaloblastic Anemia and Cognitive Dysfunction

Megaloblastic anemia arises due to deficiencies of vitamin B_{12} and/or folic acid, which are essential for DNA synthesis and methylation processes critical to myelin production [O'Leary, 2020, p. 21]. Vitamin B_{12} deficiency leads to homocysteine accumulation, causing oxidative stress and neurotoxicity [Miller, 2021, p. 34]. It also disrupts the methylation of myelin phospholipids, leading to demyelination, particularly in the spinal cord and brain [Green, 2017, p. 140].

Cognitive impairments in MA include memory deficits, disorientation, and attention decline, sometimes progressing to "pseudo-dementia" associated with vitamin B_{12} deficiency [Clarke, 2019, p. 66]. Neuroimaging studies reveal hippocampal atrophy and decreased white matter volume [Sachdev, 2020, p. 90].

Folate deficiency additionally exacerbates DNA hypomethylation and downregulates genes related to synaptic plasticity [Yajnik, 2020, p. 77].

3. Hemolytic Anemia and Cerebral Hypoxia

Hemolytic anemia is characterized by shortened red blood cell lifespan and accelerated erythrocyte destruction, resulting in hypoxia and elevated unconjugated bilirubin levels [Barcellini, 2021, p. 25]. Chronic hemolysis induces endothelial dysfunction, free radical generation, and microvascular ischemia [Hill, 2022, p. 32].

The cerebral consequences are most pronounced in sickle cell disease—a major subtype of hemolytic anemia—where patients exhibit markedly reduced cerebral blood flow and multiple white matter microinfarcts [DeBaun, 2020, p. 58]. Disrupted perfusion contributes to cognitive deficits involving reduced processing speed, executive dysfunction, and impaired visuospatial memory [Prussien, 2019, p. 101].

4. Summary of Literature Findings

Evidence indicates that all forms of anemia cause cerebral hypoxia but differ in their mechanisms: in IDA — impaired oxygen transport; in MA — metabolic and myelination dysfunction; and in HA — oxidative vascular damage and hemolysis.

DISCUSSION

A shared pathogenic mechanism among all forms of anemia is cerebral hypoxia, initiating a cascade of metabolic disruptions: decreased mitochondrial activity, lactate accumulation, glial activation, and neuronal injury.

In IDA, hypoxia directly reduces perfusion and metabolic activity, as shown in fMRI studies. In MA, hypoxia is secondary to methylation defects, rendering vitamin B_{12} deficiency particularly detrimental to cognition [Green, 2017, p. 140]. In HA, endothelial injury and oxidative stress lead to microvascular ischemia and chronic inflammation.

Collectively, these pathophysiological processes lead to cognitive impairments involving memory, attention, and executive functions. Recognition of these mechanisms is crucial for early diagnostic and therapeutic interventions.

RESULTS

Table 1. Comparative Characteristics of the Effects of Anemia Types on Cerebral Perfusion and Cognitive Function

Parameter	Iron-Deficiency Anemia (IDA)	Megaloblastic Anemia (MA)	Hemolytic Anemia (HA)
Principal deficiency	Iron (Fe)	Vitamin B_{12}, Folate	Hemoglobin (due to RBC destruction)
Mechanism of hypoxia	Reduced Hb and O_2 transport	Metabolic failure, demyelination	Hemolysis, oxidative stress
Cerebral perfusion	Decreased, especially in frontal regions	Reduced, mainly in hippocampus	Impaired, focal microischemia
Neuroimaging findings	Reduced gray matter volume	White matter atrophy	Multiple microinfarcts
Cognitive effects	Attention deficits, fatigue	Memory and orientation impairments	Executive dysfunction
Reversibility	Partially reversible	Partially reversible with	Partially reversible

		B_{12} therapy	

Scheme 1. General Pathogenic Pathway of Cognitive Dysfunction in Anemia

Iron/Vitamin B_{12} Deficiency or Hemolysis → Cerebral Hypoxia → Oxidative Stress → Neuronal Metabolic Impairment → Decreased Perfusion → Cognitive Dysfunction

CONCLUSION

Anemias of different origins exert multifactorial effects on the brain, disrupting cerebral perfusion and cognitive performance. Despite distinct primary mechanisms, all converge on neuronal hypoxia and oxidative damage. The most profound cognitive deficits are observed in megaloblastic anemia, where demyelination compounds hypoxic injury, while iron-deficiency anemia primarily results in energetic failure, and hemolytic anemia causes vascular microdamage.

Early diagnosis and correction of anemia—through iron supplementation, vitamin B_{12} and folate therapy, and antioxidant treatment—can partially restore cerebral perfusion and cognitive capacity, particularly when initiated promptly. These insights underscore the necessity of integrating neurocognitive assessment into anemia management strategies.

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