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Multidisciplinary Diagnostic and Therapeutic Approaches in Obesity-Hypoventilation Syndrome-An Updated Review For Radiologists and Respiratory Professionals

Amal Bader Almutairi [(1)] , Khawla Yousef Alqallaf [(1)] , Hend Abdullah Hassan Hassan [(2)] , Asma Saud Alanazi [(3)] , Mai Fhaid Alshammari [(4)] , Amani Mohammed Hassan Sholan [(5)] , Murdi Ali Naser Al Dawsri [(6)] , Abdurhman Majed Ali Al Dawsary [(6)] , Bader Fayz Mohammad Al Dawseri [(6)] , Misfer Marzoq Mohammad Al Dawseri [(6)] , Fahad Ali Ali Sharahili [(7)] , Rahaf Ali Alqahtani [(8)]

(1) Ad Diriyah Hospital,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(2) Health Charity For Patient Care (Enaya),Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(3) King Salman Specialist Hospital – Health Cluster,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(4) King Salman Specialist Hospital – Hail Health Cluster,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(5) Damad General Hospital,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(6) Wadi Al-Dawasir General Hospital – Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(7) Alhurrath General Hospital – Jazan,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,
(8) Riyadh – Imam Abdulrahman Al-Faisal Hospital,Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Background: Obesity-hypoventilation syndrome (OHS) is a complex disorder characterized by daytime hypercapnia, severe obesity, and sleep-disordered breathing. Its pathogenesis involves mechanical respiratory load, impaired ventilatory drive, and neurohormonal dysregulation, often coexisting with obstructive sleep apnea (OSA).

Aim: To provide an updated multidisciplinary review emphasizing diagnostic strategies and evidence-based therapeutic approaches relevant to radiologists, pulmonologists, and sleep specialists.

Methods: This narrative review synthesizes current literature on OHS epidemiology, pathophysiology, clinical features, diagnostic modalities, and management, incorporating data on PAP therapy, weight-loss interventions, cardiopulmonary complications, and multidisciplinary care.

Results: OHS is strongly associated with severe obesity and OSA, with significant cardiopulmonary morbidity including pulmonary hypertension and right heart failure. Positive airway pressure (PAP) therapy remains the cornerstone of management, improving gas exchange, reducing hypercapnia, and lowering hospitalization and mortality rates. Weight-loss interventions, including structured programs and bariatric surgery, significantly improve ventilation and OSA severity, though complete resolution is uncommon. Persistent cases may require adjunctive pharmacologic therapy or tracheostomy.

Conclusion: Early recognition, structured evaluation, and comprehensive multimodal therapy—including PAP, weight management, and specialist collaboration—are essential to prevent long-term cardiopulmonary complications and optimize outcomes in OHS.

Keywords: Obesity-hypoventilation syndrome, OSA, hypercapnia, PAP therapy, bariatric surgery, respiratory failure, pulmonary hypertension.

Introduction

Obesity-hypoventilation syndrome (OHS) was first alluded to in the medical literature in 1836 through Charles Dickens' serialized work, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, wherein he described features consistent with alveolar hypoventilation in individuals with obesity [1][2]. In contemporary clinical terms, OHS is defined by awake alveolar hypoventilation, manifesting as persistent daytime hypercapnia, with arterial carbon dioxide tension (PaCO2) exceeding 45 mmHg [5.9 kPa], in patients whose obesity cannot be attributed to alternative causes of hypoventilation such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, neuromuscular disorders, or metabolic derangements [3]. The pathophysiological underpinnings of OHS involve a complex interplay between diminished central ventilatory drive, an impaired hypercapnic ventilatory response, and restrictive pulmonary mechanics induced by excessive adiposity. This constellation of factors compromises ventilatory capacity, leading to inadequate alveolar ventilation and resultant chronic hypercapnia. The syndrome is therefore recognized as both a respiratory and metabolic disorder, situated at the intersection of obesity-related mechanical limitation and neurorespiratory dysregulation, with significant implications for cardiopulmonary morbidity if untreated.

Etiology

*Corresponding author e-mail: Amabm1994@Gmail.Com (Amal Bader Almutairi).
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The development of OHS is closely linked to the interplay between mechanical respiratory limitations and neurochemical dysregulation of ventilatory control in obese individuals. Excess adiposity imposes a substantial mechanical load on the thoracic cavity and diaphragm, thereby reducing lung volumes and compliance, while concurrently blunting the ventilatory response to carbon dioxide accumulation [4]. Obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) frequently coexists with OHS, contributing to repetitive nocturnal hypoxemia and intermittent hypercapnia, which further impairs daytime respiratory drive. Ventilatory control defects, encompassing decreased sensitivity of both hypoxic and hypercapnic respiratory reflexes, represent an additional etiological factor. The American Academy of Sleep Medicine defines apnea as cessation of airflow for at least 10 seconds and hypopnea as a reduction in airflow by 30% or more with associated oxygen desaturation or arousal [5]. While most patients with OHS exhibit concomitant OSA, approximately 10% demonstrate nonobstructive sleep hypoventilation, suggesting a distinct phenotype that operates independently of upper airway obstruction. Among patients with OHS, around 70% have severe OSA, with an apnea-hypopnea index (AHI) of 30 or more events per hour, underscoring the strong but not exclusive association between OHS and sleep-disordered breathing [6].

Epidemiology

The epidemiological profile of OHS is closely tied to the global obesity epidemic. In the United States, over one-third of adults meet criteria for obesity, with morbid obesity (BMI ≥40 kg/m²) affecting approximately 8% of the population [7][8]. The prevalence of extreme obesity (BMI >50 kg/m²) has risen markedly in recent decades, increasing tenfold between 2000 and 2005, with ongoing upward trends [9]. Among individuals with OSA, OHS is estimated to occur in 20% to 30% of cases [10], with hospitalized patients exhibiting BMIs above 35 kg/m² demonstrating a prevalence as high as 31% [11]. Obesity prevalence, and by extension OHS, varies according to gender, ethnicity, educational attainment, and age, with higher rates observed in women, non-Hispanic Black individuals, those with lower educational levels, and adults aged 40 to 59 years [12]. In Asian populations, OHS has been observed at lower BMI thresholds, highlighting ethnic variability in susceptibility [13]. Earlier assumptions suggested a male predominance in OHS, but contemporary clinical data indicate that women referred to specialized sleep clinics may experience a higher burden of disease, reflect potential referral bias and changing demographic patterns [14]. The rising prevalence of obesity and the consequent increase in OHS underscore the urgent need for early recognition and targeted management strategies to prevent cardiopulmonary and metabolic complications associated with this syndrome.

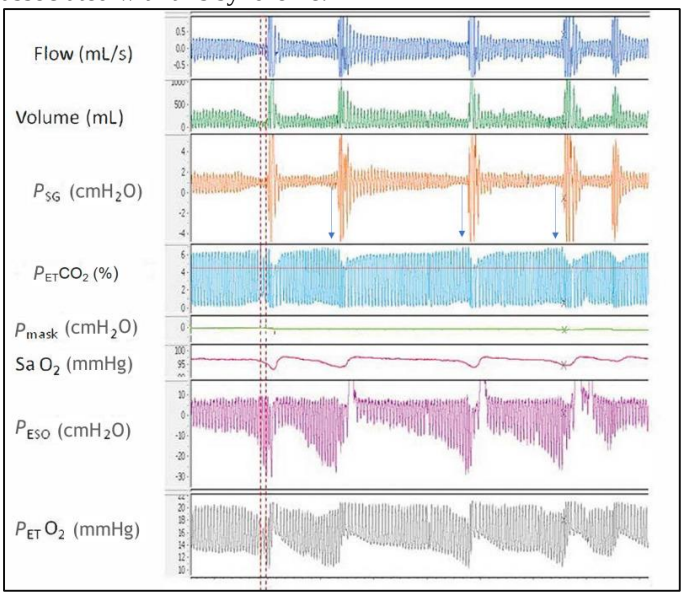

Fig. 1: Respiratory resistance and End-Tidal O2.

Pathophysiology

Obesity-hypoventilation syndrome (OHS) develops due to a complex interplay of mechanical, neurochemical, and metabolic factors that compromise ventilatory function. The primary mechanism involves an increased mechanical load on the respiratory system, which results in reduced tidal volumes and a blunted chemoreflex response to carbon dioxide (CO2). This impairment in ventilatory control diminishes central respiratory drive in individuals with obesity, ultimately producing chronic daytime hypercapnia. Multiple mechanisms contribute simultaneously, including altered airway mechanics, reduced lung compliance, abnormal chest wall configuration, and neurohormonal dysregulation [15]. Altered upper airway mechanics and impaired ventilatory control are central contributors to hypoventilation during both wakefulness and sleep in patients with OHS. In individuals with obesity, narrowed upper airways and increased airway resistance increase end-tidal CO2 levels, particularly during sleep. In patients with obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) alone, periodic hyperventilation following apneic episodes typically compensates for CO2 retention. However, when the accumulation of CO2 exceeds the patient's ventilatory capacity, the renal system compensates by retaining bicarbonate, leading over time to chronic hypercapnia and compensated respiratory acidosis [15]. The combination of obesity and OSA intensifies nocturnal hypoventilation, perpetuating daytime hypercapnia and its systemic consequences. Mechanical alterations in patients with OHS further exacerbate alveolar hypoventilation. Excess adiposity limits diaphragmatic descent and impairs chest wall expansion, producing elevated intra-abdominal and pleural pressures that reduce functional residual capacity (FRC), expiratory reserve

volume (ERV), and total lung capacity (TLC) [16][17]. Spirometry commonly demonstrates a restrictive ventilatory pattern, with reductions in forced vital capacity (FVC) and forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV1) while maintaining a preserved FEV1/FVC ratio [16][17][18][19]. These restrictive changes increase dead space ventilation due to decreased tidal volumes and compensatory increases in respiratory rate. Although evidence is limited, it remains unclear whether respiratory muscle weakness significantly contributes to OHS.

A hallmark of OHS is a blunted ventilatory response to hypercapnia and hypoxia. Unlike eucapnic individuals with OSA, who maintain normocapnia through ventilatory compensation, patients with OHS fail to increase minute ventilation appropriately in response to CO2 retention or hypoxic challenges [20][21]. Nevertheless, voluntary hyperventilation can restore eucapnia, and positive airway pressure (PAP) therapy effectively reverses hypercapnia by mechanically assisting alveolar ventilation [22]. This impaired automatic ventilatory response underscores the neurochemical dysregulation central to OHS pathophysiology. Leptin, a 16-kilodalton hormone encoded by the Ob gene, is produced by adipose tissue and functions to stimulate both satiety and hyperventilation [23][26]. In obesity, circulating leptin levels increase as a compensatory response to CO2 retention [24][25]. In patients with OHS, leptin concentrations are higher than in eucapnic obese individuals, suggesting leptin resistance, which diminishes the hormone's ventilatory stimulatory effect [27]. Treatment with PAP not only normalizes PaCO2 but also reduces circulating leptin levels, indicating partial restoration of leptin sensitivity [28]. The pathophysiology of OHS, therefore, represents the convergence of mechanical constraints, altered respiratory control, and neurohormonal dysregulation. This combination impairs the ability to maintain normocapnia during sleep and wakefulness, predisposing patients to chronic hypercapnia, respiratory acidosis, and secondary systemic complications. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for guiding therapeutic strategies, including weight management, ventilatory support, and targeted treatment of comorbid conditions such as OSA.

History and Physical

Patients with obesity-hypoventilation syndrome (OHS) frequently present in both acute and chronic care settings, depending on the severity of their condition. Acute presentations often occur in the medical intensive care unit (ICU), where patients may exhibit severe hypoxemic and hypercapnic respiratory failure, necessitating ventilatory support through noninvasive positive pressure ventilation (NIPPV) or, in more critical cases, invasive mechanical ventilation. Outpatient evaluations are typically conducted by pulmonologists or sleep medicine specialists, with patients referred for suspected sleep-disordered breathing or chronic hypoventilation. Most individuals with OHS have a body mass index (BMI) exceeding 35 kg/m², placing them at heightened risk for both respiratory and cardiovascular complications. Common clinical complaints include excessive daytime sleepiness, persistent fatigue, early morning headaches, and cognitive difficulties such as impaired attention and memory, reflecting the cumulative effects of chronic nocturnal hypoxemia and hypercapnia. Symptoms of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) are frequently reported in this population, including loud snoring, nocturnal choking or gasping, and witnessed apneic episodes. Dyspnea and exercise intolerance are also prevalent, particularly in patients with concomitant cardiopulmonary comorbidities. Physical examination often reveals features consistent with obesity and upper airway compromise. Patients may exhibit a short, wide neck, a low-lying uvula, and a crowded oropharyngeal space, predisposing them to airway obstruction during sleep. Signs of chronic right heart strain or failure, secondary to pulmonary hypertension, are commonly observed in advanced cases. These include elevated jugular venous pressure, hepatomegaly, peripheral edema, and a prominent pulmonic component of the second heart sound on auscultation. The combination of clinical history, physical findings, and risk factors such as severe obesity, daytime hypercapnia, and symptoms of sleep-disordered breathing guides the clinician in establishing a suspicion for OHS and prioritizing diagnostic evaluation. Early recognition is critical to prevent progression to severe cardiopulmonary complications.

Evaluation

Clinical evaluation of obesity-hypoventilation syndrome (OHS) requires a high index of suspicion, particularly in individuals with a body mass index (BMI) exceeding 30 kg/m² who present with unexplained dyspnea on exertion, daytime hypersomnolence, or other features suggestive of sleep-disordered breathing [33]. Patients with severe obesity or those with a confirmed diagnosis of obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) should be screened systematically for OHS, given the strong association between these conditions. Additional clinical indicators prompting evaluation include hypoxemia during wakefulness on room air, oxygen saturation (SpO2) below 94%, or elevated serum bicarbonate (HCO3) levels above 27 mEq/L, reflecting chronic compensation for persistent hypercapnia [10]. These biochemical and clinical parameters help identify patients at risk and guide the urgency and type of further investigations. Serum HCO3 levels serve as a sensitive screening tool for chronic hypercapnia. Levels above 27 mEq/L are present in approximately 50% of individuals with OHS, suggesting metabolic compensation for alveolar hypoventilation. Conversely, HCO3 levels below this threshold can effectively exclude OHS in patients with low pretest probability (<20%) [34]. The definitive diagnosis, however, relies on arterial blood gas (ABG)

analysis, which provides direct measurement of PaCO2 and PaO2. ABG testing confirms the presence of daytime alveolar hypoventilation and helps distinguish OHS from other causes of hypoventilation. Hypoventilation is defined by a PaCO2 exceeding 45 mmHg, measured via arterial, end-tidal, or transcutaneous sampling [35]. ABG analysis is often performed in acute hospital settings, where patients may present with exacerbations of hypercapnic respiratory failure. While ABG remains the gold standard, other supportive assessments, including pulse oximetry, can identify hypoxemia during wakefulness or sleep. Polysomnography is not mandatory for diagnosis but is useful in differentiating coexisting OSA from primary sleep hypoventilation, which is characterized by a rise in PaCO2 of at least 10 mmHg above the awake baseline, independent of apneas or hypopneas.

Pulmonary function testing (PFT) and imaging are integral to the evaluation, primarily to exclude alternative causes of hypoventilation. In OHS, PFTs frequently reveal a restrictive ventilatory defect, with reduced forced vital capacity (FVC) and forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV1), while the FEV1/FVC ratio remains normal. In some patients, PFTs may be within normal limits, reflecting the variability in pulmonary mechanics among individuals with OHS. Imaging, including chest radiography or computed tomography (CT) scanning, can assess structural abnormalities, rule out parenchymal lung disease, and provide baseline cardiopulmonary evaluation. Complete blood count may reveal polycythemia secondary to chronic hypoxemia, a common compensatory response in patients with prolonged alveolar hypoventilation. Laboratory evaluation also helps exclude conditions that mimic OHS, such as hypothyroidism, chronic anemia, or secondary erythrocytosis. Cardiac assessment is critical, particularly in patients with long-standing OHS, as right heart enlargement and failure secondary to pulmonary hypertension are prevalent complications. Electrocardiography (ECG) can detect right ventricular strain patterns, right axis deviation, or arrhythmias, whereas echocardiography provides structural and functional assessment of the right ventricle, pulmonary artery pressures, and overall cardiac performance. Polysomnography, combined with continuous nocturnal CO2 monitoring, remains the most comprehensive assessment for sleep-disordered breathing in suspected OHS. This evaluation quantifies the apnea-hypopnea index (AHI), oxygen desaturation index, nadir oxygen saturation, and the proportion of total sleep time spent below 90% SpO2. Severe OSA, defined as an AHI greater than 100 events per hour, or profound nocturnal hypoxia with nadir SpO2 below 60%, significantly increases the likelihood of concomitant OHS, with prevalence exceeding 75% in these populations [10]. Polysomnographic data inform both diagnosis and treatment planning, particularly for titration of positive airway pressure (PAP) therapy. In summary, the evaluation of OHS involves a structured approach that integrates clinical assessment, laboratory testing, pulmonary function studies, imaging, cardiac evaluation, and polysomnography. Elevated serum HCO3 provides an initial screening tool, whereas ABG analysis remains the definitive test for daytime hypercapnia. PFTs and imaging are critical for excluding alternative etiologies, and cardiac assessment evaluates secondary complications of chronic hypoventilation. Polysomnography refines the diagnosis and aids in identifying coexisting OSA, guiding therapeutic interventions. The combination of these diagnostic modalities ensures accurate identification of OHS, facilitates early intervention, and mitigates the risk of long-term cardiopulmonary sequelae.

Treatment / Management

Management of obesity-hypoventilation syndrome (OHS) requires a multifaceted approach that addresses the underlying mechanisms of hypoventilation, corrects sleep-disordered breathing, and mitigates cardiopulmonary complications [29][30][31]. The cornerstone of therapy is positive airway pressure (PAP), which is considered first-line treatment. Continuous PAP (CPAP) therapy is typically the initial modality of choice for patients with OHS, particularly because the majority (approximately 90%) have coexisting obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) [33]. CPAP provides constant airway pressure throughout the respiratory cycle, maintaining upper airway patency and reducing obstructive events during sleep. However, in patients who exhibit predominant hypoventilation with fewer obstructive events, bilevel PAP (BPAP) or other noninvasive pressure support modalities may be more effective [34]. BPAP is also indicated when CPAP fails to normalize hypercapnia, when patients demonstrate intolerance to high CPAP pressures, or when CPAP adherence is suboptimal. BPAP functions by independently titrating inspiratory positive airway pressure (IPAP) and expiratory positive airway pressure (EPAP), with the difference between these pressures—the driving pressure—directly influencing ventilation and CO2 elimination [35]. Monitoring arterial blood gases (ABGs) is essential for assessing the efficacy of PAP therapy, particularly in hospitalized patients presenting with acute exacerbations of chronic hypoxemic hypercapnic respiratory failure. Noninvasive ventilation should be trialed initially in patients who are arousable and have preserved gag and cough reflexes. Early intubation may be necessary in cases where patients cannot protect their airways, fail to respond to noninvasive modalities, or demonstrate rapidly worsening respiratory acidosis. In patients lacking a formal diagnosis of OSA or prior PAP titration, empirical initiation of noninvasive ventilation based on severity

of hypercapnia and body weight is warranted. Following stabilization, patients should undergo comprehensive outpatient diagnostic evaluation, including formal PAP titration in a sleep laboratory to optimize ventilatory support [29].

Adherence to PAP therapy remains a significant challenge in OHS management. Mask discomfort, device complexity, insufficient patient education, and financial constraints are common barriers. Meta-analytic evidence from 25 studies confirms that consistent PAP use improves gas exchange, reduces daytime hypersomnolence, enhances sleep quality, diminishes hospitalizations and emergency visits, and decreases overall mortality [36]. Patient-centered interventions, including education about the disease, demonstration of mask types, and support in selecting appropriate devices, significantly improve adherence and long-term outcomes. Supplemental oxygen therapy is indicated in patients who remain hypoxemic despite adequate PAP use, reported in up to 50% of cases [37]. Oxygen supplementation must be carefully monitored to avoid potential oxygen toxicity and unnecessary costs. Importantly, oxygen therapy should not be administered in isolation, as it fails to correct hypoventilation and may exacerbate hypercapnia. Randomized crossover studies demonstrate that administering 100% supplemental oxygen without ventilatory support can increase PaCO2 by approximately 5 mmHg and reduce minute ventilation, highlighting the need to combine oxygen therapy with PAP [32][38][39]. Weight loss and lifestyle modifications are fundamental adjuncts in managing OHS. Structured weight reduction programs improve pulmonary function, decrease the frequency of obstructive apneas and hypopneas, enhance nocturnal oxygenation, and reduce the risk of secondary cardiopulmonary complications such as pulmonary hypertension [40]. Targeted weight reduction of 25% to 30% of actual body weight is recommended to achieve meaningful improvements in alveolar ventilation [29]. Novel pharmacotherapies, particularly glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) receptor agonists such as tirzepatide, show potential in promoting weight loss and improving outcomes in obesity-related sleep disorders, though their efficacy in OHS specifically has not been fully evaluated [41].

For patients unable to achieve adequate weight loss through lifestyle measures, bariatric surgery is a therapeutic consideration. Surgical interventions are reserved for individuals with persistent OHS symptoms, intolerance to high PAP pressures, or worsening hypercapnia despite optimal noninvasive therapy. Evidence from a 2009 meta-analysis of 12 studies indicates that bariatric surgery can reduce the apnea-hypopnea index (AHI) by approximately 71%; however, only 38% of patients achieve complete resolution of OSA (AHI <5 events/hour), with most retaining moderate residual disease [42]. Surgical risks, particularly perioperative mortality and complications associated with coexisting OSA, necessitate careful preoperative evaluation and immediate post-extubation PAP support [43][44][45]. Tracheostomy is reserved for patients intolerant to or non-adherent with PAP therapy or those with severe complications, such as cor pulmonale [46]. While effective in alleviating upper airway obstruction, tracheostomy does not correct the underlying pathophysiology of OHS, including reduced ventilatory drive, impaired pulmonary mechanics, or neurohumoral alterations. Most patients still require concurrent PAP therapy to maintain adequate ventilation. Pharmacological interventions have a limited role in OHS. Respiratory stimulants, including acetazolamide, medroxyprogesterone, and theophylline, are considered adjunctive therapies in select cases of persistent hypercapnia despite PAP use and weight loss [47]. Acetazolamide inhibits renal bicarbonate reabsorption, reducing central chemoreceptor pH and theoretically stimulating ventilatory drive. Medroxyprogesterone acts centrally to enhance respiratory drive but carries risks of hypercoagulability, venous thromboembolism, and hormonal side effects [48]. Theophylline, a bronchodilator and respiratory stimulant, lacks evidence for efficacy in OHS and is generally not recommended. Recombinant human leptin (metreleptin) is FDA-approved for congenital or acquired generalized lipodystrophy with leptin deficiency but has not been evaluated for therapeutic use in OHS [49]. In conclusion, management of OHS requires an integrated, multidisciplinary approach. PAP therapy remains the cornerstone of treatment, supplemented by weight reduction strategies, lifestyle modifications, and, when indicated, bariatric surgery or tracheostomy. Adjunctive pharmacological therapy is reserved for refractory cases. Optimization of therapy necessitates regular monitoring, adherence support, and comprehensive evaluation of cardiopulmonary status to prevent morbidity and improve patient outcomes. Early identification and tailored intervention are critical to mitigating the long-term sequelae of OHS and enhancing quality of life.

Differential Diagnosis

Obesity-hypoventilation syndrome (OHS) shares features with several other conditions that result in chronic hypercapnia or sleep-disordered breathing, making careful differential diagnosis essential. Central sleep apnea (CSA) is one such condition, characterized by intermittent reductions in central respiratory drive during sleep. Unlike OHS, patients with CSA often demonstrate hyperventilation during wakefulness, and arterial blood gas analysis typically reveals normocapnia or mild hypocapnia rather than the sustained hypercapnia observed in OHS. CSA may also present with periodic breathing patterns, such as Cheyne-Stokes respiration, and is frequently associated with underlying cardiovascular conditions, including heart failure, which can further complicate its differentiation from OHS [50]. Chronic obstructive

pulmonary disease (COPD) represents another important differential consideration. Obese patients with COPD can experience overlapping sleep-disordered breathing, and hypercapnia may develop as a consequence of both the underlying obstructive pulmonary pathology and coexisting obesity. Pulmonary function testing (PFT) and arterial blood gas (ABG) analysis are essential in these cases to distinguish between COPD-related hypercapnia and OHS. Specifically, the presence of a primarily obstructive ventilatory defect on spirometry excludes OHS as the primary etiology of hypercapnia, whereas a restrictive pattern with preserved FEV1/FVC ratio is more characteristic of OHS. Additionally, COPD may present with other clinical findings such as chronic cough, sputum production, and radiographic evidence of emphysema or airway remodeling [50].

Extrapulmonary restrictions of the chest wall and abdomen can also mimic OHS by impairing ventilatory mechanics. Conditions such as severe scoliosis, kyphosis, pectus excavatum, ascites, or significant bowel distension can exert cephalad pressure on the diaphragm, limiting tidal volumes and functional residual capacity. These disorders typically reduce ventilatory reserve but do not always lead to overt hypercapnic respiratory failure unless combined with other risk factors. Physical examination, history of musculoskeletal or abdominal disease, and imaging studies aid in distinguishing these patients from those with OHS. Neuromuscular disorders are another critical category in the differential diagnosis. Diseases such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) frequently result in hypercapnic respiratory failure due to diaphragmatic and accessory muscle weakness. Clinical signs, including fasciculations, progressive limb weakness, and hyperactive deep tendon reflexes, assist in differentiating ALS from OHS [51]. Similarly, patients with spinal cord injuries (SCIs) often exhibit restrictive ventilatory patterns and chronic hypercapnia due to impaired neural control of respiration. Unlike OHS, these patients are generally not obese and have a history of trauma or acute neurological injury. Sleep-disordered breathing is also common in this population, necessitating polysomnography and PFTs to establish an accurate diagnosis [52][53][54][55].

Muscular dystrophies, including Duchenne and Becker types, may produce hypercapnic respiratory failure. These conditions are typically accompanied by generalized muscle weakness, delayed growth, cardiomyopathy, and elevated creatine kinase levels, making recognition in pediatric populations more straightforward. Becker muscular dystrophy may follow a milder or more variable course than Duchenne, but both can result in respiratory compromise requiring ventilatory support. Other neuromuscular and post-infectious conditions, including Guillain-Barré syndrome, myasthenia gravis, and poliomyelitis or post-polio syndrome, may also present with hypercapnia. Guillain-Barré syndrome usually manifests as rapidly progressive ascending paralysis, areflexia, and potential dysautonomia leading to cardiac instability. Myasthenia gravis is characterized by fatigable weakness affecting ocular, bulbar, and limb muscles, often associated with dysarthria, ptosis, diplopia, and weak cough. Poliomyelitis and post-polio syndrome present with acute or delayed muscle weakness and fatigability, though these are now exceedingly rare due to widespread vaccination programs. Endocrinopathies, particularly severe hypothyroidism resulting in myxedema, can similarly cause hypoventilation and hypercapnic respiratory failure. Affected patients may exhibit bradycardia, hypothermia, delayed tendon reflexes, and in severe cases, hemodynamic instability or neurological deficits, including altered mental status or coma. Recognition of these systemic manifestations in conjunction with laboratory assessment of thyroid function is key to distinguishing myxedema from OHS. Overall, differentiating OHS from other causes of hypercapnic respiratory failure requires careful integration of clinical history, physical examination, laboratory studies, pulmonary function testing, and sleep studies. Features suggestive of obesity-related hypoventilation, including high BMI, daytime hypercapnia, preserved FEV1/FVC ratio, and coexisting obstructive sleep apnea, support a diagnosis of OHS. In contrast, identifying primary pulmonary obstruction, neuromuscular weakness, extrapulmonary restriction, or systemic endocrinopathies points toward alternative etiologies. Accurate differentiation is crucial for selecting the most appropriate treatment strategies, including noninvasive ventilation, weight management, or targeted therapy for the underlying condition.

Prognosis

Obesity-hypoventilation syndrome (OHS) carries a significant risk of morbidity and mortality, largely due to its progressive nature and frequent underdiagnosis. Even among patients with morbid obesity, OHS is commonly overlooked, resulting in repeated hospitalizations for acute exacerbations of hypercapnic respiratory failure [56]. The chronic elevation of arterial carbon dioxide leads to persistent respiratory acidosis, which can trigger a cascade of cardiopulmonary complications over time. Pulmonary hypertension and right heart failure are particularly prominent, contributing to progressive biventricular dysfunction and eventual volume overload [57]. These cardiovascular sequelae compound the risks associated with obesity itself, such as metabolic syndrome and systemic inflammation, creating a synergistic impact on overall patient outcomes. Therapeutic interventions, especially noninvasive approaches like positive airway pressure (PAP), demonstrate substantial benefits in modifying the clinical course of OHS. PAP therapy improves

ventilation, reduces nocturnal hypercapnia, and alleviates daytime somnolence, which collectively enhance quality of life and decrease healthcare utilization. Despite these benefits, patients with severe OHS continue to exhibit higher mortality rates compared to those with isolated obstructive sleep apnea (OSA). Hospitalization rates, ICU admissions, and post-discharge complications are consistently elevated in this population [58]. Long-term prognosis depends not only on adherence to PAP therapy but also on comprehensive management of comorbidities such as cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome, and obesity-related complications. Early diagnosis and initiation of therapy remain critical in reducing both acute decompensations and cumulative morbidity associated with this condition.

Complications

Untreated or progressive OHS leads to a wide range of serious cardiopulmonary complications. Chronic alveolar hypoventilation results in sustained hypercapnia and hypoxemia, which exert direct effects on the right heart. Pulmonary hypertension is a frequent outcome, secondary to hypoxia-induced vasoconstriction and increased pulmonary vascular resistance. Over time, this can lead to biventricular heart failure, volume overload, and systemic venous congestion [59]. The chronic hemodynamic strain contributes to lower exercise tolerance, increased fatigue, and reduced quality of life. Patients with OHS typically report persistent daytime sleepiness, impaired concentration, and a higher frequency of hospitalizations, all of which exacerbate the overall symptom burden. Data from post-hoc analyses, such as the Pickwick trial, highlight the prevalence and severity of pulmonary complications in OHS. In this study, elevated systolic pulmonary artery pressures (≥40 mmHg) were observed in approximately half of the participants with OHS [59]. In patients with non-severe OSA, obesity and specific diastolic flow patterns were predictive of reduced arterial pH, whereas in those with severe OSA, low awake PaO2 levels and higher body mass index were identified as risk factors for persistent respiratory acidosis. The interplay between obesity, sleep-disordered breathing, and chronic hypercapnia underlines the need for aggressive monitoring and management to prevent progression to right heart failure and other severe cardiopulmonary complications.

Consultations

Early referral to specialists is essential in the evaluation and management of OHS. Sleep medicine specialists play a critical role in conducting polysomnography and continuous CO2 monitoring, which help differentiate OHS from isolated OSA or other hypoventilation syndromes. Pulmonologists and critical care physicians provide expertise in managing acute hypercapnic respiratory failure, optimizing ventilatory support, and guiding PAP therapy initiation. In patients with significant obesity or comorbid conditions, bariatric surgeons and endocrinologists may be involved in planning weight management strategies. Early multidisciplinary involvement ensures timely diagnosis, appropriate intervention, and reduction in preventable morbidity associated with delayed recognition of the syndrome.

Patient Education

Patient education is a cornerstone of managing OHS. Individuals should be informed about the progressive nature of the condition, its association with sleep-disordered breathing, and the potential long-term complications. Counseling should emphasize the importance of adherence to PAP therapy, demonstrating its direct role in reducing hypercapnia, improving daytime alertness, and lowering cardiovascular risk. Equally important is patient engagement in weight loss strategies, which may include structured dietary interventions, exercise programs, or consideration of pharmacological and surgical options. Educating patients about the signs of acute decompensation, such as worsening dyspnea or sleepiness, ensures early intervention and prevents hospital readmissions.

Other Issues

OHS represents one of the most significant respiratory consequences of obesity, often coexisting with OSA. Diagnosis requires demonstration of wakeful hypoventilation, indicated by PaCO2 exceeding 45 mmHg in the context of a BMI greater than 30 kg/m2, while excluding other pulmonary, neuromuscular, or chest wall disorders. Serum bicarbonate levels serve as a sensitive screening tool, but arterial PCO2 measurements remain the definitive diagnostic parameter. The apnea-hypopnea index and the percentage of sleep time with SpO2 below 90% provide critical polysomnographic data. PAP therapy, initiated with CPAP, remains the first-line treatment, reducing nocturnal CO2 retention and improving both daytime alertness and overall health outcomes.

Enhancing Healthcare Team Outcomes

Management of OHS requires a coordinated, multidisciplinary approach due to the complexity of the syndrome and the high risk of cardiopulmonary morbidity. Optimal outcomes depend on early recognition, accurate diagnosis, and sustained adherence to therapy. Primary care physicians, pulmonologists, sleep specialists, bariatric surgeons, nurses, pharmacists, and other healthcare professionals must collaborate to ensure comprehensive care. Clear delineation of roles, effective communication, and coordinated follow-up are essential to prevent acute decompensations and optimize long-term outcomes. Patient education on PAP adherence, weight management, and early symptom recognition is integral to the care plan. Ethical practice, informed consent, and respect for patient autonomy should guide all clinical decisions, ensuring that management strategies align with individual patient needs. An evidence-based, team-oriented approach improves not only clinical outcomes but also patient safety, quality of life, and

overall healthcare efficiency, emphasizing the importance of multidisciplinary engagement in treating OHS.

Conclusion:

Obesity-hypoventilation syndrome remains a serious, underdiagnosed condition with significant cardiopulmonary consequences. Its complex pathophysiology—combining mechanical restriction, impaired ventilatory drive, and neurohormonal factors—predisposes patients to chronic hypercapnia, pulmonary hypertension, and right heart failure if untreated. Early identification is crucial, particularly in individuals with severe obesity or coexisting OSA. Positive airway pressure therapy continues to be the most effective intervention, improving daytime ventilation, sleep quality, and overall survival. Long-term management requires a multidisciplinary approach that integrates weight-loss strategies, evaluation for bariatric surgery, and targeted treatment of comorbidities. Although PAP adherence remains a challenge, patient-centered education and follow-up significantly enhance success rates. By combining diagnostic vigilance with comprehensive therapeutic strategies, healthcare teams can meaningfully reduce morbidity and improve quality of life for patients affected by this complex syndrome.

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