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Impact of Targeted Temperature Management on Acute Kidney Injury in Post-cardiac Arrest Patients

Kanda Kheu*

Department of Medicine, Duke University School of Medicine, Durham, North Carolina, USA

Introduction

Acute Kidney Injury (AKI) is a common and serious complication in patients who have experienced cardiac arrest. It results from a complex interplay of ischemia-reperfusion injury, hemodynamic instability, and systemic inflammatory responses, all of which contribute to renal dysfunction. AKI is associated with increased morbidity and mortality, prolonged hospital stays, and higher rates of long-term renal impairment. Targeted temperature management (TTM) has been widely implemented as a neuroprotective strategy following cardiac arrest, aiming to improve neurological outcomes and overall survival. However, its impact on kidney function remains an area of active investigation. Understanding the effects of TTM on AKI development, severity, and recovery is crucial for optimizing post-cardiac arrest care.

Cardiac arrest leads to global ischemia, triggering a cascade of pathophysiological changes that affect multiple organ systems, including the kidneys. Upon resuscitation, reperfusion injury exacerbates oxidative stress, endothelial dysfunction, and inflammatory responses, all of which contribute to renal tubular injury. The severity of AKI is influenced by factors such as the duration of ischemia, the presence of pre-existing kidney disease, and post-resuscitation hemodynamic stability. Patients who develop AKI after cardiac arrest have worse clinical outcomes, including increased rates of multi-organ failure, prolonged dependence on renal replacement therapy, and higher mortality [1].

Description

TTM involves the controlled reduction of body temperature to mitigate neurological injury following cardiac arrest. By decreasing metabolic demand, reducing excitotoxicity, and attenuating inflammatory responses, TTM improves the likelihood of favorable neurological recovery. The most commonly studied temperature targets are mild hypothermia (32–34°C) and normothermia (36–37.5°C), with current guidelines recommending individualized temperature management based on patient characteristics and clinical response. While the primary goal of TTM is to preserve brain function, its systemic effects on other organs, including the kidneys, have gained attention in recent years. The relationship between TTM and AKI is complex and influenced by multiple factors. Hypothermia induces physiological changes that may either protect or predispose the kidneys to injury. On one hand, cooling reduces metabolic demand, oxidative stress, and systemic inflammation, which could confer renal protection [2]. On the other hand, hypothermia alters renal perfusion, induces vasoconstriction, and promotes diuresis, potentially exacerbating kidney injury. The net effect of TTM on AKI is therefore dependent on the balance between these protective and detrimental mechanisms.

Several clinical studies have explored the incidence and severity of AKI in post-cardiac arrest patients undergoing TTM. Findings have been inconsistent, with some studies suggesting that hypothermia reduces the risk of severe AKI, while others indicate no significant difference or even an increased risk of renal dysfunction. Variability in study designs, patient populations, temperature protocols, and AKI definitions may account for these discrepancies. Nonetheless, certain key observations have emerged, shedding light on the potential mechanisms underlying the effects of TTM on renal function. Hypothermia-induced vasoconstriction has been proposed as a contributing factor to AKI in patients undergoing TTM. Cooling reduces cardiac output and redistributes blood flow away from peripheral organs, including the kidneys, leading to transient reductions in renal perfusion. While the kidneys possess autoregulatory mechanisms to maintain adequate blood flow, prolonged hypoperfusion can lead to ischemic injury, particularly in susceptible patients. The degree of renal vasoconstriction may depend on the depth and duration of hypothermia, with more profound cooling potentially exacerbating renal ischemia [3].

Another important consideration is the impact of TTM on fluid balance and electrolyte homeostasis. Hypothermia induces a cold diuresis, characterized by increased urine output and natriuresis, which can lead to hypovolemia and electrolyte imbalances. Dehydration and hypotension may further compromise renal perfusion, increasing the risk of AKI. Additionally, alterations in sodium, potassium, and magnesium levels can have direct effects on renal tubular function and exacerbate cellular injury. Careful fluid management is therefore essential in post-cardiac arrest patients receiving TTM to mitigate the risk of volume depletion and electrolyte disturbances. Inflammation and oxidative stress play a central role in both post-cardiac arrest syndrome and AKI pathophysiology [4]. TTM has been shown to modulate inflammatory responses by reducing cytokine release, inhibiting leukocyte activation, and attenuating oxidative damage. These anti-inflammatory effects may protect the kidneys from secondary injury, particularly in patients with severe systemic inflammation following resuscitation. However, the extent to which TTM mitigates AKI through inflammation reduction remains an area of ongoing research.

The choice of temperature target in TTM protocols may influence AKI outcomes. Some studies suggest that mild hypothermia (32–34°C) is associated with a higher risk of AKI compared to normothermia (36–37.5°C). This may be due to greater hemodynamic alterations, increased vasoconstriction, and prolonged exposure to cold-induced diuresis. Conversely, normothermia may preserve renal perfusion while still providing neuroprotective benefits. Recent trials comparing targeted hypothermia to normothermia have not demonstrated a significant difference in overall survival, prompting a shift towards individualized temperature management based on patient-specific factors. The timing and duration of TTM may also affect AKI risk. Early initiation of cooling following resuscitation has been associated with improved neurological outcomes, but its impact on kidney function is less clear. Prolonged cooling may increase the likelihood of renal hypoperfusion and exacerbate ischemic injury, whereas shorter durations may be insufficient to confer meaningful protection. Determining the optimal duration of TTM for minimizing AKI while maximizing neuroprotection remains a subject of investigation.

Renal Replacement Therapy (RRT) is frequently required in patients with severe AKI following cardiac arrest. The need for RRT is associated with worse clinical outcomes, including higher mortality rates and prolonged intensive care unit stays. TTM may influence the decision to initiate RRT, as hypothermia can alter fluid balance, acid-base status, and electrolyte levels. Clinicians must carefully weigh the risks and benefits of RRT initiation in the context of TTM to optimize renal recovery while minimizing complications [5].

***Address for Correspondence:** Kanda Kheu, Department of Medicine, Duke University School of Medicine, Durham, North Carolina, USA; E-mail: kheukan@gmail.com*

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Conclusion

In conclusion, AKI is a significant complication in patients resuscitated from cardiac arrest, with important implications for morbidity and mortality. TTM, while primarily used for neuroprotection, has complex effects on renal function that must be carefully considered. Hypothermia-induced vasoconstriction, fluid shifts, and inflammation modulation all contribute to the interplay between TTM and AKI risk. The optimal temperature target, timing, and duration of TTM remain areas of active research, with emerging evidence supporting a more individualized approach to temperature management. Future studies should aim to refine TTM protocols, integrate novel biomarkers for early AKI detection, and explore adjunctive therapies to protect renal function in this vulnerable patient population.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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