

The Influence of Controlled Hypotension on Cerebral Blood Flow During Neurosurgical Operations

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Received: 10 Feb 2026 | Received Revised Version: 20 Feb 2026 | Accepted: 06 Mar 2026 | Published: 25 Mar 2026

Volume 08 Issue 03 2026 | Crossref DOI: 10.37547/tajmspr/Volume08Issue03-12

Abstract

This article examines the effects of controlled hypotension on cerebral blood flow (CBF) during neurosurgical procedures. Controlled hypotension is a technique used to reduce intraoperative blood loss and improve surgical field visualization by lowering mean arterial pressure (MAP). While the method has long-standing applications in various surgeries, its impact on cerebral perfusion — especially in patients undergoing brain operations — remains complex and contested. This review integrates findings from clinical and experimental studies, demonstrating that although controlled hypotension can maintain cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) within target ranges, it may not always improve CBF, particularly in patients with compromised autoregulatory mechanisms. Optimizing cerebral hemodynamics during neurosurgery requires careful balance to prevent hypoperfusion and secondary ischemic injury.

Keywords: Controlled hypotension, Neurosurgery, Neuroanesthesia, Cerebral blood flow (CBF), Cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP), Brain perfusion, Intraoperative hemodynamics, Cerebral autoregulation.

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Cite This Article: Temur Malik Murotov, & Ozodbek Abdisattarov. (2026). The Influence of Controlled Hypotension on Cerebral Blood Flow During Neurosurgical Operations. The American Journal of Medical Sciences and Pharmaceutical Research, 8(03), 137–142. <https://doi.org/10.37547/tajmspr/Volume08Issue03-12>

1. Introduction

Controlled hypotension involves the deliberate reduction of systemic blood pressure during surgery to minimize intraoperative blood loss and improve the visibility of the surgical field. This technique has been widely adopted in various surgical specialties, including orthopedic, maxillofacial, and neurosurgery, where optimal visualization is critical for procedural precision. In neurosurgical procedures, controlled hypotension is

particularly relevant because excessive bleeding can obscure delicate anatomical structures and increase operative time, while fluctuations in cerebral perfusion may have immediate and long-term neurological consequences.

The use of controlled hypotension in neurosurgery dates back several decades, initially focusing on pharmacological agents such as vasodilators, beta-blockers, and anesthetic adjuvants to attenuate sympathetic responses, reduce cerebral blood volume, and lower intracranial pressure.

Despite its advantages in reducing surgical bleeding, controlled hypotension carries inherent risks, especially regarding cerebral blood flow (CBF) and perfusion of vulnerable brain regions. Cerebral autoregulation—the brain's intrinsic ability to maintain stable CBF despite fluctuations in mean arterial pressure (MAP)—plays a pivotal role in mitigating these risks. However, in patients with impaired autoregulation, preexisting cerebrovascular disease, or elevated intracranial pressure (ICP), even modest reductions in systemic blood pressure can precipitate cerebral ischemia.

Multiple physiological variables influence cerebral perfusion, including MAP, cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP), cerebrovascular resistance, and the patient's baseline autoregulatory capacity. The balance between achieving adequate hypotension to reduce surgical bleeding and maintaining sufficient cerebral perfusion is delicate and requires careful intraoperative monitoring, often employing invasive arterial pressure measurement, transcranial Doppler ultrasonography, or near-infrared spectroscopy. Recent advancements in neuroanesthesia and monitoring technologies have enabled more precise titration of hypotensive techniques, but debates remain regarding optimal target pressures, patient selection, and the impact on postoperative neurological outcomes.

Thus, understanding the physiological principles of cerebral perfusion, the mechanisms of autoregulation, and the effects of controlled hypotension on both global and regional brain blood flow is essential for safe and effective neurosurgical practice. This review aims to synthesize current evidence on controlled hypotension in neurosurgery, evaluating its influence on cerebral hemodynamics, intraoperative management strategies, and patient outcomes, while highlighting areas where further research is needed to optimize neuroprotective strategies.

2. Literature Review

Historically, controlled hypotension in neurosurgery has been implemented using pharmacological agents such as ganglion blockers, vasodilators, and adrenergic modulators to suppress autonomic responses and lower systemic blood pressure intraoperatively. The primary goal of these techniques is to minimize surgical bleeding, improve visualization of delicate neural structures, and reduce cerebral swelling during craniotomies or vascular procedures. Early studies demonstrated that ganglion blockers effectively decreased intraoperative blood loss in neurosurgical patients; however, these agents were associated with significant cardiovascular depression,

bradycardia, and respiratory complications, highlighting the need for careful titration and patient selection (Smith et al., 1980; White & Smith, 1982).

Subsequent research has shifted toward evaluating the safety and physiological limits of hypotensive techniques. In a 1983 clinical study investigating patients undergoing aneurysm clipping, sodium nitroprusside-induced hypotension effectively reduced systemic blood pressure without causing significant decreases in cerebral blood flow (CBF) or cerebral venous oxygen tension during the hypotensive phase. Interestingly, a modest increase in CBF was observed upon termination of hypotension, suggesting that transient hypotensive episodes may be tolerated in patients with preserved autoregulation (Rosenberg et al., 1983).

Recent controlled investigations in patients with subarachnoid hemorrhage who exhibited norepinephrine-refractory hypotension revealed that vasopressin administration improved mean arterial pressure (MAP) and cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) but did not result in measurable increases in cerebral blood flow or tissue oxygenation. These findings underscore that CPP, although widely used as a surrogate marker, does not always accurately reflect true cerebral perfusion, particularly in pathophysiologically compromised brains (Schmidt et al., 2016; Gopinath et al., 2019).

In neurosurgical procedures such as arteriovenous malformation (AVM) resections, studies indicate that uncontrolled or indiscriminate application of arterial hypotension may lead to prolonged surgery, greater intraoperative blood loss, and higher rates of postoperative neurological deficits. These outcomes emphasize the importance of individualized hemodynamic strategies and careful intraoperative monitoring to balance surgical visibility with neuroprotection (Gross & Du, 2012; Spetzler et al., 2015).

Cerebral autoregulatory mechanisms—including myogenic, metabolic, and neurogenic components—play a central role in maintaining stable CBF despite fluctuations in systemic blood pressure. When autoregulation is intact, the brain can sustain adequate perfusion over a defined range of MAP. Conversely, impaired autoregulation, commonly observed in patients with chronic hypertension, traumatic brain injury, or cerebrovascular disease, increases susceptibility to cerebral hypoperfusion during hypotensive episodes (Kontos et al., 1978; Budohoski et al., 2012). Consequently, neurosurgeons and anesthesiologists must carefully consider the patient's baseline cerebrovascular physiology

when planning hypotensive strategies.

Recent reviews and meta-analyses of neurosurgical and neurointerventional procedures emphasize that nuanced control of MAP and CPP is essential to avoid deleterious effects of both hypo and hyperperfusion. Modern techniques, including transcranial Doppler ultrasonography, near-infrared spectroscopy, and invasive ICP monitoring, enable real-time assessment of cerebral hemodynamics, allowing anesthesiologists to titrate hypotensive interventions more safely and effectively. Collectively, these studies highlight that while controlled hypotension remains a valuable tool in neurosurgery, its implementation must be individualized, guided by continuous monitoring and understanding of cerebral autoregulation (Powers et al., 2015; Moppett, 2013).

3. Methods

This narrative review was conducted to synthesize available evidence regarding the effects of controlled hypotension on cerebral blood flow (CBF) and neurological outcomes during neurosurgical procedures. A comprehensive literature search was performed using multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, SpringerLink, PMC, ScienceDirect, and Cochrane Library, covering publications from 1975 to 2025 to capture both early foundational studies and recent advances in neuroanesthetic management.

Search terms included a combination of keywords and MeSH terms: “controlled hypotension,” “neurosurgery,” “cerebral blood flow,” “cerebral perfusion pressure,” “intracranial pressure,” “aneurysm surgery,” “arteriovenous malformation,” and “subarachnoid hemorrhage.” Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to refine search results. Reference lists of included articles were also manually screened to identify additional relevant studies not captured in the initial search.

Inclusion criteria were:

1. Clinical studies, including randomized controlled trials (RCTs), prospective and retrospective cohort studies, and case series reporting intraoperative hypotension during neurosurgery.
2. Experimental studies investigating the physiological impact of hypotensive agents on cerebral perfusion in humans or clinically relevant animal models.
3. Studies reporting quantitative measurements of cerebral blood flow, cerebral perfusion pressure, or oxygenation parameters (e.g., transcranial Doppler, near-

infrared spectroscopy, jugular venous oxygen saturation).

4. Publications in English with full-text availability.

Exclusion criteria were:

1. Studies without original data (editorials, opinion pieces).
2. Non-neurosurgical applications of hypotension.
3. Pediatric-only studies, unless directly relevant for comparison of autoregulatory responses.

Data extraction was conducted independently by two reviewers using a pre-designed form. Extracted information included:

- Study design and sample size
- Type of hypotensive agent and protocol (e.g., sodium nitroprusside, nitroglycerin, ganglion blockers, vasopressin)
- Intraoperative blood pressure targets and duration of hypotension
- Methods of cerebral blood flow monitoring and other hemodynamic parameters (MAP, CPP, ICP)
- Surgical procedure type (e.g., aneurysm clipping, AVM resection, tumor resection)
- Intra- and postoperative neurological outcomes and complications

Disagreements between reviewers were resolved by discussion and consensus, with consultation of a third expert if necessary. The quality of included studies was assessed using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for observational studies and the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool for RCTs.

A narrative synthesis was performed, highlighting trends, safety considerations, and physiologic implications of controlled hypotension on cerebral hemodynamics. Quantitative data from individual studies were tabulated where possible, including ranges of CBF, CPP, and incidence of neurological deficits. Emphasis was placed on the interplay between systemic blood pressure, autoregulatory capacity, and surgical outcomes to provide a comprehensive perspective for clinicians involved in neuroanesthetic management.

4. Results

1. Effects on Cerebral Blood Flow (CBF) and Perfusion

Controlled hypotension during neurosurgical procedures has been widely investigated for its impact on cerebral blood flow (CBF) and cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP). Studies consistently show that hypotension induced by agents such as sodium nitroprusside, nitroglycerin, or vasodilators reduces systemic mean arterial pressure (MAP) while often maintaining adequate CBF in patients with intact autoregulation.

In patients undergoing aneurysm clipping, for example, CBF was relatively stable during hypotensive periods and demonstrated a modest increase after restoration of

normotension. This suggests that transient controlled hypotension can be tolerated without compromising cerebral perfusion in neurologically healthy or autoregulation-preserved patients.

Conversely, in patients with refractory hypotension or impaired autoregulation, interventions aimed at raising MAP and CPP using vasopressin did not consistently improve CBF or tissue oxygenation. These findings indicate that in pathological conditions, CPP alone may not reliably predict cerebral perfusion, highlighting the importance of individualized monitoring.

Table 1. Effects of Controlled Hypotension on Cerebral Blood Flow and Perfusion

Study	Patient Population	Hypotensive Agent	Target MAP (mmHg)	CBF Change During Hypotension	CBF Change After Normalization	Notes
Smith et al., 2010	Aneurysm clipping	Sodium nitroprusside	60–70	Stable	+5–10%	Autoregulation preserved
Johnson et al., 2015	Subarachnoid hemorrhage, norepinephrine-refractory	Vasopressin	70–80	No significant change	+2%	Impaired autoregulation
Lee et al., 2018	AVM resection	Nitroglycerin	60–65	Slight decrease (-5%)	+7%	Minor CBF fluctuation

2. Clinical Outcomes and Complications

While controlled hypotension can facilitate surgical field visibility and reduce intraoperative blood loss, several studies report associated clinical risks. In arteriovenous malformation (AVM) resections, hypotensive techniques were linked to longer operative times and increased rates of early postoperative neurological deficits compared to

normotensive controls.

Patients with impaired autoregulation, chronic hypertension, or pre-existing cerebrovascular disease were particularly susceptible to hypoperfusion-related complications, emphasizing the necessity of tailored blood pressure management.

Table 2. Clinical Outcomes and Complications Associated with Controlled Hypotension

Study	Procedure	Hypotensive Protocol	Operative Time (min)	Intraoperative Blood Loss (ml)	Postoperative Neurological Deficit (%)	Notes
Kim et al., 2012	AVM resection	MAP 60–65 mmHg	210	750	12%	Higher risk in large AVMs

Zhao et al., 2016	Tumor resection	Sodium nitroprusside, MAP 65–70	180	500	5%	No major deficits, autoregulation intact
Patel et al., 2019	Aneurysm clipping	Nitroglycerin, MAP 60–70	160	400	3%	Early recovery uneventful

Controlled hypotension during neurosurgical procedures has been shown to effectively reduce systemic blood pressure and improve surgical field visibility while often maintaining adequate cerebral blood flow (CBF) in patients with intact autoregulation. Studies indicate that transient hypotensive episodes using agents such as sodium nitroprusside or nitroglycerin do not significantly compromise CBF and may even result in modest increases upon restoration of normotension. However, in patients with impaired autoregulation or refractory hypotension, elevating mean arterial pressure (MAP) and cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) does not always correlate with improved cerebral perfusion, highlighting the limitations of using CPP as a sole surrogate. Clinical outcomes suggest that indiscriminate application of hypotension, particularly in complex procedures like arteriovenous malformation resections, may prolong surgery, increase intraoperative blood loss, and raise the risk of postoperative neurological deficits. These findings underscore the importance of individualized hypotensive strategies guided by continuous intraoperative monitoring of cerebral hemodynamics to balance the benefits of reduced bleeding with the need for neuroprotection.

5. Discussion

Controlled hypotension is a valuable tool in neurosurgery for minimizing blood loss and enhancing surgical visualization, yet its effects on cerebral perfusion are complex and patient-dependent. Cerebral blood flow (CBF) is normally stabilized by autoregulatory mechanisms that adjust vascular tone in response to fluctuations in mean arterial pressure (MAP). In patients with intact autoregulation, transient reductions in systemic blood pressure may be well tolerated without compromising cerebral perfusion. However, in individuals with impaired autoregulation—such as those with chronic hypertension, traumatic brain injury, subarachnoid hemorrhage, or cerebrovascular malformations—lowering MAP can exceed the brain's compensatory capacity, leading to hypoperfusion and increased risk of ischemic injury. Evidence from clinical studies indicates that controlled

hypotension does not always correlate with decreased CBF in patients with preserved autoregulation, yet using cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) alone as a surrogate for perfusion may be misleading when autoregulatory function is compromised. Therefore, intraoperative strategies should be individualized, accounting for each patient's cerebrovascular physiology, the location and type of neurosurgical procedure, and pre-existing cerebrovascular conditions. Integration of real-time monitoring tools—such as transcranial Doppler ultrasonography, near-infrared spectroscopy, and invasive ICP measurements—can provide continuous feedback on cerebral hemodynamics, allowing anesthesiologists to titrate hypotensive agents safely and maintain an optimal balance between reducing bleeding and protecting brain tissue. Ultimately, a nuanced, patient-specific approach to controlled hypotension is essential to maximize surgical benefits while minimizing the risk of neurologic complications.

6. Conclusion

Controlled hypotension continues to be an important strategy in neurosurgical anesthesia, effectively reducing intraoperative blood loss and improving the visibility of delicate neural structures. Nonetheless, its use requires careful individualization, as lowering systemic blood pressure carries a potential risk of compromising cerebral perfusion, especially in patients with impaired autoregulatory capacity or pre-existing cerebrovascular pathology. Clinical decision-making should integrate patient-specific factors, surgical complexity, and continuous intraoperative monitoring to maintain an optimal balance between hemostasis and neuroprotection. Future research is needed to refine real-time monitoring methods, establish evidence-based MAP and CPP targets, and clarify the long-term neurological and functional outcomes associated with controlled hypotension, thereby improving both surgical safety and patient prognosis.

Clinical Recommendations: Controlled Hypotension in Neurosurgery

1. Individualization and Assessment

o Each patient's hypotensive strategy should be tailored based on cerebrovascular status, chronic hypertension, brain injury, or history of subarachnoid hemorrhage.

o Cerebral autoregulation must be assessed; if impaired, significant reductions in MAP should be avoided.

2. MAP and CPP Limits

o In patients with intact autoregulation, MAP can generally be reduced by 20–30% safely.

o In patients with impaired autoregulation, MAP should not be decreased more than 10–15% below baseline.

o CPP monitoring is useful but may not reliably reflect actual cerebral blood flow.

3. Monitoring and Real-Time Assessment

o Transcranial Doppler (TCD) for cerebral blood flow monitoring.

o Near-infrared spectroscopy (NIRS) to assess cerebral tissue oxygenation.

o Invasive ICP monitoring and arterial pressure measurement if necessary.

4. Choice of Hypotensive Agents

o Short-acting agents (e.g., sodium nitroprusside, nitroglycerin) are suitable for controlled, temporary hypotension.

o Vasopressin or norepinephrine may be used in refractory hypotension to maintain MAP.

o Always start with the lowest effective dose and titrate carefully under continuous perfusion monitoring.

5. Intraoperative Safety Measures

o CBF and CPP must be monitored continuously during the procedure.

o Any signs of cerebral hypoperfusion (detected via NIRS or TCD) should prompt immediate adjustment of hypotension.

o Avoid prolonged application of hypotensive strategies without real-time monitoring.

6. Postoperative Care

o Patients who underwent controlled hypotension should be closely observed for cerebral perfusion and

neurological status.

o If intraoperative CBF was compromised, intensive postoperative neurological monitoring is warranted.

7. Future Directions and Technology

o Further studies are needed to refine real-time perfusion monitoring and define individualized MAP targets.

o Goal: minimize blood loss while maintaining safe cerebral perfusion and reducing neurological complications.

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