International Journal of Cardiovascular Research

Commentary A SCITECHNOL JOURNAL

A Comprehensive Review of Metabolic Dysregulation and Pathophysiology of Cardiac Cachexia in Heart Failure Patients

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Received date: 27 March, 2024 Manuscript No. ICRJ-24-137445;

Editor assigned date: 29 March, 2024, PreQC No. ICRJ-24-137445 (PQ);

Reviewed date: 12 April, 2024, QC No. ICRJ-24-137445;

Revised date: 19 April, 2024, Manuscript No. ICRJ-24-137445 (R);

Published date: 29 April, 2024, DOI: 10.4172/2324-8602.1000551.

Description

Cardiac cachexia is a debilitating syndrome characterized by progressive weight loss, muscle wasting, and metabolic abnormalities in patients with Chronic Heart Failure (CHF). Despite advances in cardiovascular medicine, cardiac cachexia remains a significant clinical challenge associated with poor prognosis and increased mortality. Chronic Heart Failure (CHF) is a complex clinical syndrome characterized by impaired cardiac function and systemic hemodynamic derangements. While therapeutic interventions have improved outcomes in CHF patients, the development of cardiac cachexia represents a grave complication, contributing to further morbidity and mortality. Cardiac cachexia is defined by the involuntary loss of skeletal muscle and adipose tissue, leading to profound weakness, fatigue, and metabolic disturbances.

The pathogenesis of cardiac cachexia is multifactorial, involving complex interactions between neurohormonal, inflammatory, and metabolic pathways. Chronic activation of the sympathetic nervous system and renin-angiotensin-aldosterone system, characteristic of CHF, leads to increased catecholamine release and sodium retention, promoting fluid retention and peripheral edema. Concurrently, pro-inflammatory cytokines such as Tumor Necrosis Factor-alpha (TNF-α) and interleukin-6 (IL-6) are upregulated, triggering systemic inflammation and oxidative stress. These neurohormonal and inflammatory flow culminate in catabolic dysregulation, characterized by accelerated protein breakdown, impaired protein synthesis, and insulin resistance. Consequently, skeletal muscle undergoes progressive wasting, while adipose tissue is depleted, resulting in cachexia's characteristic features of weight loss and muscle wasting.

Patients typically present with unintentional weight loss, often exceeding 5% of their baseline body weight within six to twelve months. Concurrently, they experience muscle wasting, characterized by decreased muscle mass, strength, and functional capacity. Fatigue, dyspnea, and exercise intolerance are common, impairing physical activity and diminishing quality of life. Nutritional deficiencies and metabolic abnormalities, including anorexia, malabsorption, and altered energy metabolism, further amplifies cachexia's debilitating effects.

The diagnosis of cardiac cachexia requires a comprehensive evaluation encompassing clinical, biochemical, and imaging parameters. Key diagnostic criteria include significant unintentional weight loss (>5% within twelve months), reduced body mass index (<20 kg/m²), and evidence of skeletal muscle wasting on physical examination or imaging studies. Laboratory investigations may reveal hypoalbuminemia, elevated inflammatory markers (e.g., C-reactive protein), and metabolic abnormalities such as insulin resistance and dyslipidemia. Imaging modalities such as Dual-Energy X-Ray Absorptiometry (DEXA) and Computed Tomography (CT) scans can assess muscle mass and adipose tissue distribution, aiding in the diagnosis and monitoring of cardiac cachexia.

The management of cardiac cachexia necessitates a multidisciplinary approach targeting both underlying cardiac dysfunction and associated metabolic disturbances. Optimization of heart failure therapy with beta-blockers, angiotensin-converting enzyme inhibitors, and diuretics aims to stabilize hemodynamics and improve cardiac function. Concurrently, nutritional support plays a pivotal role in replenishing depleted energy stores and preserving lean body mass. Dietary interventions, including supplementation with high-calorie, high-protein meals and oral nutritional supplements, are recommended to attenuate catabolic processes and promote anabolism. In severe cases, enteral or parenteral nutrition may be warranted to meet caloric needs and prevent further weight loss.

Exercise training, supervised by a cardiac rehabilitation program, represents an integral component of cachexia management, enhancing skeletal muscle strength, endurance, and functional capacity. Despite advances in current management strategies, the therapeutic field of cardiac cachexia is evolving, with emerging therapies targeting novel pathways implicated in its pathogenesis. Pharmacological agents such as ghrelin mimetics, Selective Androgen Receptor Modulators (SARMs), and myostatin inhibitors hold promise in promoting muscle growth and attenuating muscle wasting. Moreover, nutritional supplements enriched with essential amino acids, omega-3 fatty acids, and antioxidants may exert beneficial effects on muscle metabolism and function.

Conclusion

In conclusion, cardiac cachexia represents a destructive complication of chronic heart failure, characterized by progressive weight loss, muscle wasting, and metabolic derangements. Despite its clinical significance, cardiac cachexia remains poorly understood and challenging to manage. A multidisciplinary approach encompassing optimization of heart failure therapy, nutritional support, and exercise training is essential in attenuating cachexia's debilitating effects and improving patient outcomes. Emerging therapies targeting novel pathways implicated in cachexia's pathogenesis offer hope for future intervention and may ultimately reduce the burden of this devastating syndrome on affected individuals and healthcare systems alike.

Citation: *Parsly W (2024) A Comprehensive Review of Metabolic Dysregulation and Pathophysiology of Cardiac Cachexia in Heart Failure Patients. Int J Cardiol Res 13:2.*