Research Article
E-ISSN: 0099-6157
Volume 15, Issue No. 01. 2024

MEDICAL UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA BULLETIN

Connecting Low Body Temperature During Surgery to Wound Infections in Abdominal Procedures.

[1]Parizo, [2]Plana Gomez
[1,2] New York Medical College, United States of America
Corresponding Email : Parizo84563@gmail.com

Article History :
Received date : 2023/10/09
Revised date : 2023/11/27
Accepted date : 2023/12/14
Published date : 2024/01/01

ABSTRACT

Introduction: Surgical site infections (SSIs) represent a significant source of morbidity and healthcare costs following surgical procedures. While numerous factors contribute to SSI risk, **intraoperative hypothermia**, defined as a core body temperature below 36∘C, has been consistently implicated as a preventable risk factor. This literature review examines the relationship between intraoperative hypothermia and the incidence of surgical site infections in patients undergoing general abdominal surgery, a common domain in general surgery. Understanding this connection is crucial for optimizing patient care and improving postoperative outcomes.

Literature Review: The available evidence strongly suggests a direct correlation between intraoperative hypothermia and an increased risk of SSIs. Mechanisms proposed for this association include impaired immune function, leading to reduced neutrophil activity and oxidative killing capacity, and vasoconstriction, which decreases oxygen delivery to surgical tissues. Studies have demonstrated that even mild hypothermia can significantly elevate SSI rates by compromising the host's ability to resist bacterial contamination. Various interventions,

such as forced-air warming devices and warmed intravenous fluids, have been shown to maintain normothermia and consequently reduce SSI incidence. The impact of hypothermia appears to be particularly relevant in prolonged or complex abdominal procedures.

Conclusion: Intraoperative hypothermia is a modifiable risk factor that significantly contributes to the incidence of surgical site infections in general abdominal surgery. Maintaining normothermia throughout the perioperative period is a critical component of infection prevention strategies. Implementing active warming measures should be a standard practice to improve patient safety and reduce the burden of SSIs. Further research focusing on optimal warming protocols and patient-specific risk factors could further refine these strategies.

Keywords: Intraoperative Hypothermia, Surgical Site Infection, General Abdominal Surgery, Normothermia, Complications.

Introduction

Surgical site infections (SSIs) remain a major complication in surgical practice, contributing substantially to patient morbidity, prolonged hospital stays, increased healthcare costs, and, in severe cases, mortality (Mangram et al., 1999). Despite advancements in surgical techniques, antibiotic prophylaxis, and sterile practices, SSIs continue to pose a significant challenge. A myriad of patient-related, procedure-related, and environmental factors are known to influence the risk of developing an SSI. Among these, **intraoperative hypothermia**, defined as a patient's core body temperature falling below 36∘C during surgery, has emerged as a particularly important and modifiable risk factor (Kurz et al., 1996).

General abdominal surgery, encompassing a wide range of procedures from appendectomies to complex bowel resections, is a common domain where SSIs are frequently encountered. The large surgical fields, potential for bowel contamination, and varying durations of these procedures make patients undergoing abdominal surgery particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of hypothermia. This literature review aims to critically examine the existing evidence regarding the relationship between intraoperative hypothermia and the incidence of surgical site infections in patients undergoing general abdominal surgery. Understanding this critical connection is essential for implementing effective preventative strategies and enhancing patient safety and recovery within the field of general surgery.

Literature Review

The relationship between **intraoperative hypothermia** and the increased risk of **surgical site infection (SSI)** in general abdominal surgery has been a consistent finding in numerous clinical trials and observational studies. This association is well-supported by physiological mechanisms that explain how even mild decreases in core body temperature can compromise the host's defense mechanisms.

One of the primary mechanisms linking hypothermia to SSI involves **impaired immune function**. Hypothermia has been shown to directly suppress neutrophil function, including their ability to migrate to the site of infection and perform oxidative killing of bacteria (Kurz et al., 1996). The normal inflammatory response crucial for wound healing and infection prevention is blunted when the body's core temperature drops. This systemic impairment of the immune system makes the surgical wound more vulnerable to bacterial colonization and subsequent infection.

Another critical factor is **peripheral vasoconstriction**, a physiological response to hypothermia aimed at conserving core body heat. While beneficial for maintaining core temperature, this vasoconstriction reduces blood flow to the periphery, including the surgical incision (Frank et al., 1997). Diminished tissue perfusion leads to decreased **oxygen delivery** to the wound. Oxygen is vital for collagen synthesis, fibroblast proliferation, and the activity of phagocytic cells, all of which are essential components of effective wound healing and the prevention of infection. Studies have consistently shown that even a modest reduction in tissue oxygen tension can significantly increase SSI rates (Greif et al., 2000).

Clinical trials have provided strong evidence for this connection. A landmark study by **Kurz et al. (1996)** demonstrated a three-fold increase in the incidence of SSIs in patients undergoing colorectal surgery who became hypothermic compared to those who remained normothermic. This study also highlighted that **mild hypothermia** (as little as 1.9∘C below normal) was sufficient to significantly elevate infection rates. Subsequent research has replicated these findings across a spectrum of abdominal procedures, reinforcing the notion that maintaining **normothermia** is a critical component of infection control bundles.

Furthermore, hypothermia can also have an indirect effect by increasing the risk of **perioperative bleeding** and the need for **blood transfusions** (Rajagopalan et al., 2008). Increased blood loss can further compromise tissue oxygenation, and blood transfusions themselves have been associated with immunomodulatory effects that may increase susceptibility to infection (Hill et al., 2007).

The duration and complexity of the abdominal surgical procedure also appear to influence the impact of hypothermia. Longer operations provide more time for body temperature to drift downwards and for bacterial contamination to occur, making meticulous temperature management even more crucial in such cases. The evidence strongly supports the implementation of active warming strategies, such as forced-air warming blankets, warmed intravenous fluids, and maintaining a warm operating room environment, as effective measures to prevent intraoperative hypothermia and, consequently, reduce SSI rates in general abdominal surgery (Scott and Buckland, 2006).

Conclusion

The body of evidence overwhelmingly supports a clear and significant relationship between intraoperative hypothermia and an increased incidence of surgical site infections in patients undergoing general abdominal surgery. The underlying physiological mechanisms, including impaired immune function and reduced tissue oxygenation due to vasoconstriction, provide a robust explanation for this association. Even mild degrees of hypothermia have been shown to compromise the host's ability to combat bacterial contamination effectively, leading to adverse outcomes.

Given that intraoperative hypothermia is a modifiable risk factor, its prevention should be a high priority in surgical practice. Implementing active warming strategies, such as the routine use of forced-air warming devices and warmed intravenous fluids, is an effective and evidence-based approach to maintaining normothermia throughout the perioperative period. By doing so, clinicians can significantly reduce the risk of SSIs, improve patient safety, shorten hospital stays, and decrease healthcare costs. Continued vigilance and adherence to established warming protocols are essential for optimizing outcomes in general abdominal surgery.

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