JNI Jurnal Neuroanestesi Indonesia Literature Review

# Cerebral Perfusion Pressure in Traumatic Brain Injury: A Dynamic Battlefield of Flow and Pressure

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Received: February 28, 2025; Accepted: August 15, 2025; Publish: February 21, 2026
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**Abstract**

Introduction: Traumatic brain injury (TBI) affects 27-69 million people annually, with over 55 million living with long-term disability. A major management challenge is disruption of cerebral autoregulation, a mechanism that maintains stable cerebral blood flow (CBF) despite systemic pressure changes. Impaired cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) autoregulation promotes ischemia, edema, and metabolic imbalance, worsening neurological outcomes. Method: This narrative review synthesized literature from PubMed, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and the Cochrane Library, focusing on studies from the past decade. Keywords included "cerebral perfusion pressure," "autoregulation," "traumatic brain injury," "TBI," "mechanism," "pressure reactivity index," and "monitoring." Discussion: TBI-related autoregulation impairment stems from vascular injury, inflammation, and myogenic dysfunction, with patterns ranging from intact to delayed or absent responses. The pressure reactivity index (PRx) enables continuous autoregulation assessment and determination of patient-specific optimal CPP (CPPopt). Observational data link maintaining CPP near CPPopt with better outcomes, while time below CPPopt increases mortality risk. Experimental models identify endothelin-1, ERK1/2, and interleukin-6 as key mediators, with targeted interventions showing potential to preserve reactivity. Conclusion: Integrating mechanistic insights with invasive monitoring and PRx-guided CPP optimization offers a promising, individualized strategy for TBI care, warranting confirmation in large clinical trials.

**Keywords**: Traumatic brain injury, cerebral perfusion pressure, autoregulation, cerebral blood flow, monitoring

J. neuroanestesi Indones 2026; 15(1): 44–57

## Introduction

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a significant cause of health deterioration and disability across the globe. According to the 2016 Global Burden of Disease (GBD) data, the estimated global annual incidence of TBI was 27.08 million, with an age-standardized rate of 369 per 100,000 population. However, another study that utilized open-source epidemiological data on traffic injuries to estimate TBI incidence worldwide suggested a higher figure of 69 million, surpassing the GBD estimate. The global prevalence of TBI was approximately 55.5 million, with an age-standardized rate of 759 per 100,000.1 Each year, approximately 50 to 60 million people suffer from TBI. TBI survivors were living with post-traumatic complications, including neurological and psychosocial issues, as well as long-term disability.[1] The 2017 Commission reported that TBI is expected to remain one of the leading causes of injury-related deaths and disabilities until 2030. Among neurological disorders, TBI has the highest occurrence and represents a significant public health challenge.[2] Neuronal damage in TBI is classified as primary injury, occurring immediately due to mechanical forces, and secondary injury, which arises later

doi: https://doi.org/10.24244/jni.v15i1.668
ISSN (Print): 2088-9674 ISSN (Online): 2460-2302

JNI is accredited as Sinta 2 Journal: https://sinta.kemdikbud.go.id/journals/profile/796

How to cite: Primanov RM, et al, "Cerebral Perfusion Pressure in Traumatic Brain Injury: A Dynamic Battlefield of Flow and Pressure".

from inflammation, ischemia, and metabolic disturbances.[3]

Cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP), the difference between mean arterial pressure (MAP) and intracranial pressure (ICP), ensures oxygen delivery to brain tissue. Normally ranging from 60 to 80 mmHg, CPP is regulated by cerebral autoregulation, where vasodilation compensates for low CPP, while vasoconstriction responds to elevated CPP to maintain stable blood flow.4 Maintaining adequate CPP is essential in managing intracranial conditions like TBI, as impaired autoregulation can reduce cerebral blood flow, leading to hypoxia and increased morbidity and mortality. Preserving cerebral perfusion post-injury is therefore critical.[2,5,9] TBI management prioritizes optimizing cerebral blood flow, yet continuous monitoring remains a challenge. While ICP, MAP, and CPP serve as practical indicators, they do not account for autoregulatory dysfunction. Alternative CPP monitoring methods have been developed for neurointensive care (NIC).[6]

Cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) autoregulation maintains stable brain blood flow under normal conditions; however, in traumatic brain injury (TBI), this regulation is disrupted, leading to altered cerebral blood flow and impaired pressure control. Understanding how this autoregulation functions in normal and injured states is essential for managing TBI. Moreover, disruptions in the autoregulatory mechanism can have profound implications on the clinical outcomes of TBI patients, affecting recovery and long-term prognosis. This article explores the physiology of CPP autoregulation, focusing on its mechanisms under normal and pathological conditions, particularly in the context of traumatic brain injury (TBI). It examines how autoregulation functions to maintain stable cerebral blood flow (CBF) and the various physiological responses involved. Additionally, this discussion highlights factors that can disrupt autoregulation in TBI, such as injury severity, inflammation, and vascular tone alterations. By synthesizing findings from experimental and clinical studies, this article provides insights into the complexities of CPP regulation and how these mechanisms are affected by TBI. A deeper understanding of autoregulation physiology may contribute to improved management strategies for maintaining cerebral perfusion and preventing secondary brain injury. In addition to exploring the physiological basis and pathophysiological disruption of CPP autoregulation, this review also examines its clinical translation, including invasive monitoring modalities, pressure reactivity index (PRx)–based assessment, and individualized CPP targets. These applications represent a growing frontier in TBI management, aiming to bridge mechanistic understanding with real-time, patient-specific therapy.

## II. Method

This study utilized a narrative literature review approach to explore the physiological mechanisms and clinical aspects related to traumatic brain injury (TBI) and cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) autoregulation. Relevant literature was identified through non-systematic searches in scientific databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, ScienceDirect, and the Cochrane Library. The search was guided by keywords including “cerebral perfusion pressure,” “autoregulation,” “traumatic brain injury,” “TBI,” “mechanism,” “pressure reactivity index,” and “monitoring.” To ensure relevance, the review primarily considered peer-reviewed journal articles published within the last ten years. Older studies were included selectively when they provided foundational concepts or were frequently cited in more recent literature. Preference was given to studies discussing the pathophysiological mechanisms, clinical observations, and implications of CPP regulation following TBI in both acute and chronic contexts. The selection process was based on the relevance of titles and abstracts to the review’s objective. Articles were included if they discussed human-based clinical or experimental research, were written in English, and provided accessible full-text content. Studies that did not directly address TBI or CPP autoregulation, or lacked substantive discussion on the physiological mechanisms, were excluded. The findings were synthesized

qualitatively to highlight recurring patterns, key mechanisms, and clinical insights.

## III. Physiology of Cerebral Perfusion Pressure

Cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP), the difference between mean arterial pressure (MAP) and intracranial pressure (ICP), is essential for oxygen and nutrient delivery to the brain. Maintaining CPP (60–80 mmHg) is crucial in conditions like traumatic brain injury (TBI) and hemodynamic instability. Since CPP is derived from MAP and ICP, its measurement often requires invasive monitoring to prevent ischemic brain injury. The body regulates ICP by displacing cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) into the spinal subarachnoid space, but this mechanism can fail with increased intracranial volume from cerebral edema, hemorrhage, or space-occupying lesions, leading to dangerously high ICP. Cerebral autoregulation helps stabilize cerebral blood flow (CBF) and CPP despite blood pressure fluctuations. However, deviations beyond the autoregulatory range can result in cerebral ischemia and neuronal damage, emphasizing the need for optimal CPP maintenance.[7,8]

Under normal conditions, intracranial pressure (ICP) remains low, making cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) primarily dependent on mean arterial pressure (MAP). MAP, the average arterial pressure over a cardiac cycle, is measured invasively or calculated as MAP = (SBP + 2 × DBP) ÷ 3. Its normal range is 70–100 mmHg, with fluctuations due to factors like exercise or stress, which generally do not affect CPP if ICP remains stable. Cerebral autoregulation maintains stable cerebral blood flow (CBF) and CPP within a MAP range of 50–150 mmHg through vasodilation and vasoconstriction. In hypertensive patients, the autoregulatory setpoint shifts, requiring adjustments in MAP to maintain CBF. Understanding the relationship between CBF, CPP, and MAP is essential for managing intracranial pathologies and hemodynamic disturbances.[7]

CPP drives cerebral blood flow (CBF), ensuring oxygen and nutrient delivery, and is regulated by the balance between MAP and ICP. In TBI, elevated ICP can impair perfusion, increasing the risk of ischemic injury. The Monro-Kellie doctrine states that the intracranial cavity, a fixed space containing brain tissue, blood, and CSF, requires volume compensation to prevent ICP elevation. When compensatory mechanisms fail, severe ICP elevation can trigger the Cushing reflex, characterized by hypertension and bradycardia, as the body attempts to restore CPP. This reflex is a critical indicator of dangerously elevated ICP and requires immediate intervention.[7]

## IV. Cerebral Blood Flow

Cerebral blood flow (CBF) is determined by blood pressure and vascular resistance, following the principle that flow is proportional to pressure and inversely proportional to resistance. This relationship is mathematically expressed as:

$$\text{Flow} = \frac{\text{Pressure}}{\text{Resistance}}$$

However, within the cranial cavity, intracranial pressure (ICP) must also be considered, as it affects cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP). The regulation of CBF is determined by the following equation:

$$\text{CBF} = \frac{\text{Cerebral Perfusion Pressure (CPP)}}{\text{Cerebral Vascular Resistance (CVR)}}$$

Cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP), the difference between systemic blood pressure (BP) and intracranial pressure (ICP), regulates CBF to maintain stability despite systemic fluctuations.

$$\text{CPP} = \text{Blood Pressure (BP)} - \text{Intracranial Pressure (ICP)}$$

## V. Intracranial Pressure

Intracranial pressure (ICP), measured relative to the foramen of Monro, normally ranges from 0 to 135 mm CSF (0–10 mmHg). However, transient elevations in ICP can occur during activities

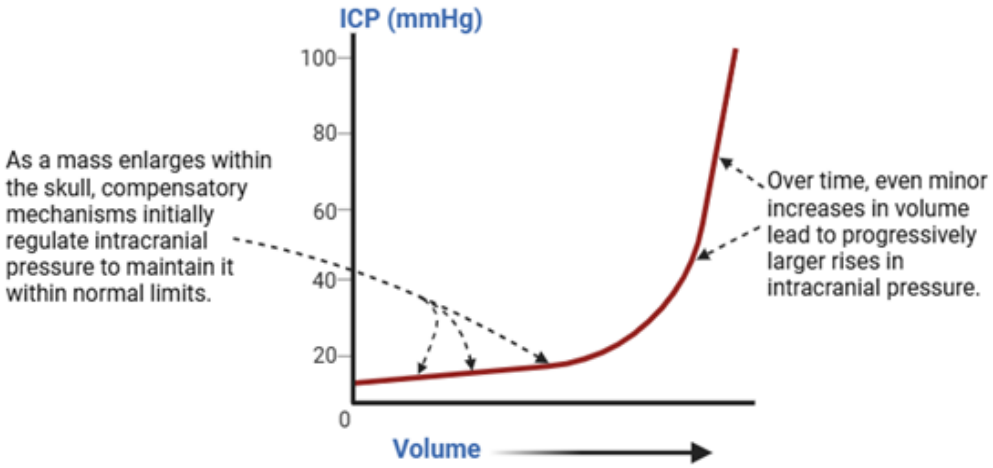


Figure 1. Intracranial Pressure Dynamics in Response to Volume Expansion. Initially, compensatory mechanisms regulate intracranial pressure (ICP), keeping it stable despite increasing volume. However, as volume continues to rise, these mechanisms fail, causing sharp and exponential increases in ICP. Even small volume changes at this stage can lead to significant pressure elevations, increasing the risk of brain herniation. Adapted from: Lindsay KW, Bone I, Fuller G. Raised intracranial pressure.[9]

that increase intrathoracic or intra-abdominal pressure, such as coughing or straining, with values temporarily reaching up to 1000 mm CSF. These short-term spikes are usually well tolerated, but sustained increases in ICP can pose significant risks to cerebral perfusion and overall brain function.[9]

Ventricular catheter monitoring of ICP reveals rhythmic fluctuations with cardiac and respiratory cycles. As intracranial mass expands and compensatory mechanisms fail, transient pressure elevations (pressure waves) appear. These waves increase in both frequency and intensity as the overall ICP continues to rise.[9] Increasing ICP progressively reduces cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP), eventually reaching a critical threshold where cerebral blood flow declines significantly. When blood flow drops to approximately 20 ml/100 g/min, cortical electrical activity begins to deteriorate, impairing normal brain function. In cases where autoregulatory mechanisms are already compromised, these effects may occur even earlier. If ICP rises to match mean arterial pressure, cerebral perfusion ceases entirely, leading to severe ischemic consequences and potential brain herniation.[9]

## VI. Autoregulation

Cerebral blood flow (CBF) is tightly regulated to meet the brain's metabolic demands, primarily through chemoregulation and autoregulation. Chemoregulation adjusts cerebral vessel diameter in response to extracellular pH and metabolic by-products, with arterial carbon dioxide ($PCO_2$) playing a key role in vasodilation and vasoconstriction. Oxygen levels ($PO_2$) significantly impact cerebral circulation only when they drop below 50 mmHg, triggering hypoxia-induced vasodilation. Autoregulation stabilizes CBF by adjusting arteriole diameter in response to changes in cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP), ensuring consistent blood supply and protecting the brain from ischemia or pressure-related damage.[9]

Autoregulation maintains stable cerebral blood flow despite changes in cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP), ensuring consistent oxygen and nutrient delivery to the brain.9 When cerebral perfusion pressure decreases, cerebral arterioles undergo vasodilation, a response likely mediated by the intrinsic myogenic properties of vascular smooth muscle. This dilation helps preserve adequate blood flow to the brain. Conversely, when cerebral

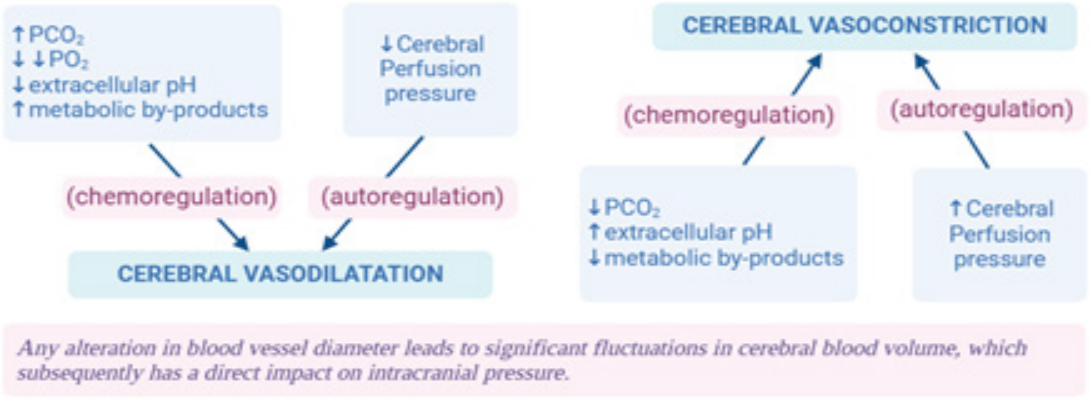


Figure 2. Regulation of Cerebral Blood Flow: The Role of Vasodilation and Vasoconstriction. Cerebral blood flow is regulated through vasodilation and vasoconstriction, influenced by chemoregulation and autoregulation. Increased partial pressure of carbon dioxide ($pCO_2$), decreased partial pressure of oxygen ($pO_2$), lower extracellular potential of Hydrogen (pH), and metabolic by-products trigger cerebral vasodilation, while reduced cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) also induces vasodilation via autoregulation. Conversely, decreased $pCO_2$, lower extracellular pH, and metabolic by-products cause cerebral vasoconstriction through chemoregulation, while increased CPP leads to vasoconstriction via autoregulation. These vascular changes significantly affect cerebral blood volume and directly impact intracranial pressure (ICP). [9]

perfusion pressure rises, vasoconstriction occurs, preventing excessive blood flow and protecting the cerebral vasculature from potential damage. [9] Neurogenic mechanisms have minimal direct influence on cerebral vasculature but may modulate the autoregulatory range.9 This suggests that while neural inputs do not directly control cerebral vessel diameter, they may influence the threshold at which autoregulatory processes operate effectively. Autoregulation fails when CPP drops below 60 mmHg or exceeds 160 mmHg. Under these extreme conditions, cerebral blood flow becomes increasingly dependent on perfusion pressure rather than intrinsic vascular adjustments.[9] In brain injuries such as traumatic head trauma or subarachnoid hemorrhage, impaired autoregulation increases the risk of ischemia when cerebral perfusion pressure is reduced. Conversely, excessively high perfusion pressure can elevate cerebral blood flow beyond normal limits, potentially disrupting the blood-brain barrier. This may result in cerebral edema, as seen in hypertensive encephalopathy, worsening neurological damage.[5]

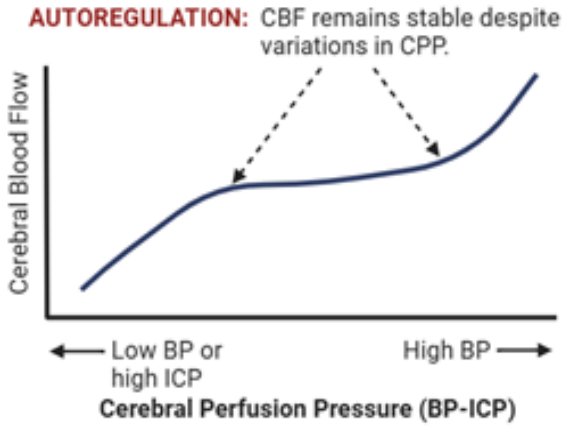


Figure 3. Cerebral Autoregulation: The Relationship Between Cerebral Blood Flow and Cerebral Perfusion Pressure. Cerebral autoregulation keeps cerebral blood flow (CBF) stable within a certain cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) range, determined by blood pressure (BP) and intracranial pressure (ICP). Low Cp CPP caused by low BP or high ICP, reduces CBF and risk ischemia, while high CPP increase CBF, risking vascular damage. Outside this range, CBF becomes pressure-dependent, leading to potential brain dysfunction.[3]

## VII. Microvascular and Cellular Basis of Cerebral Autoregulation

CBF autoregulation ensures a stable blood supply to the brain, maintaining consistent delivery of oxygen and glucose despite variations in CPP. This process is driven by the myogenic response (MR), where vascular smooth muscle cells (VSMCs)

induce vasoconstriction when CPP rises and vasodilation when CPP falls, preserving CBF.[10] According to Figure 5, increased segmental vascular resistance prevents excessive perfusion pressure from reaching capillaries, reducing the risk of rupture and cerebral vasogenic edema. Unlike peripheral circulatory systems, where precapillary arterioles predominantly regulate vascular resistance, in the brain, approximately 50% of total cerebral vascular resistance is regulated at the microvascular level. is attributed to the middle cerebral arteries (MCAs) and pial arteries.

The remaining resistance is distributed across downstream pial arterioles (PAs) and capillaries. The autoregulation of CBF is primarily mediated by MR mechanisms, which operate at multiple levels of the cerebral vascular network, including the pial arteries. Cerebral blood flow (CBF) autoregulation is a coordinated process involving parenchymal arterioles (PA), pial arteries, and precapillary arterioles, which help maintain the integrity of downstream capillaries and the blood-brain barrier (BBB), protecting the brain from ischemic or hemorrhagic damage. While this regulation primarily involves VSMCs in arteries and arterioles, recent studies suggest α-SMA-positive pericytes in the capillary basement membrane also contribute to cerebral vascular resistance.[8-10]

CBF autoregulation at the brain's surface is primarily mediated by the myogenic response (MR) of pial arteries and the middle cerebral artery (MCA), serving as the first line of protection in cerebral circulation. Studies on young male Sprague-Dawley (SD) rats show that MCAs constrict in response to transmural pressure increases between 40 and 160 mmHg. However, when blood pressure exceeds 140–160 mmHg or under pathological conditions, surface-level autoregulation becomes insufficient to prevent excessive pressure from reaching smaller arterioles and capillaries, necessitating additional regulatory mechanisms.[10]

PAs function as a critical regulatory "bottle neck" in cerebral circulation, limiting the transmission of elevated CBF and CPP to deep cortical capillaries. Compared to MCAs and pial arteries, these arterioles exhibit stronger myogenic tone at lower pressures due to increased L-type calcium channel activity and uncoupled BK_Ca channels. Isolated PA experiments in young SD rats show 20% constriction when transmural pressure rises from 10 to 30 mmHg. This MR mechanism

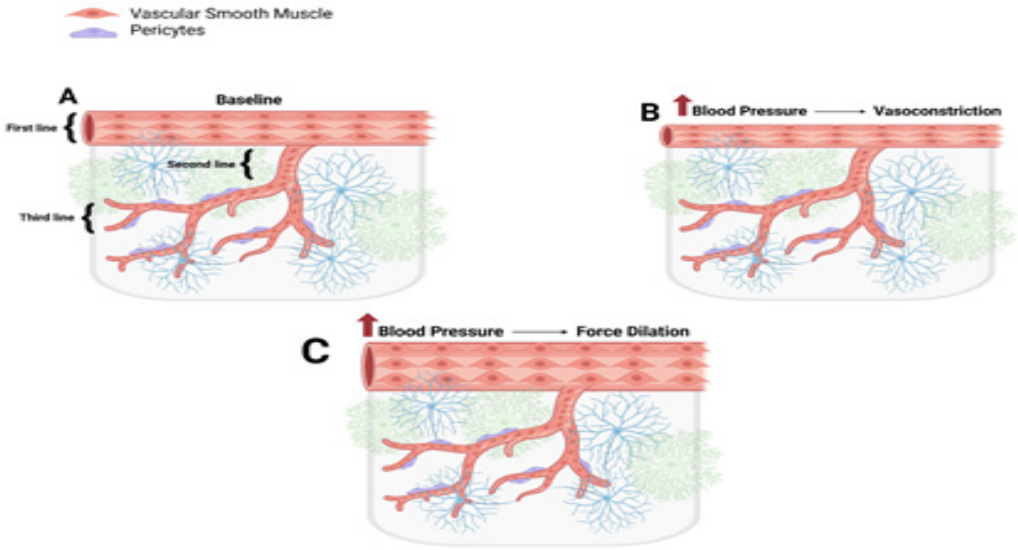


Figure 4. The figure illustrates how parenchymal arteries regulate perfusion pressure to protect capillaries and prevent vasogenic edema. In (B), increased blood pressure triggers vasoconstriction to maintain autoregulation. In (C), when blood pressure exceeds the autoregulatory capacity, forced dilation occurs, and autoregulation fails. Adapted from: Lindsay KW, Bone I, Fuller G. Raised intracranial pressure.[3]

in PAs plays a pivotal role in regulating deep cortical CBF, acting as a secondary protective mechanism. Recent studies in normal SD rats show that deep cortical capillary blood flow increases more than surface flow during acute blood pressure elevation, indicating that PA constriction limits pressure transmission to deeper capillaries.[8,10] In contrast, aged diabetic rats exhibit impaired MR in both MCAs and PAs, leading to compromised surface and deep cortical CBF autoregulation. Dysfunction in this process is linked to BBB leakage, tight junction disruption, pericyte detachment, and microvessel rarefaction in the hippocampal CA3 region, potentially contributing to inflammation, neurodegeneration, and cognitive decline.[10]

The role of cerebrovascular mural cells in CBF regulation remains debated due to their heterogeneity. Some researchers suggest precapillary VSMCs, rather than capillary pericytes, primarily control deep cortical CBF. This is supported by the absence of α-SMA in pericytes, while precapillary arterioles are surrounded by α-SMA-positive VSMCs. Single-cell RNA sequencing shows low contractile marker expression (ACTA2, MYL9) in pericytes, though a subset co-expressing ACTA2, PDGFRB, and RGS5 suggests the presence of contractile pericytes.[9,10] Studies in the adult mouse cortex reveal structural diversity among microvascular pericytes. Ensheathing pericytes, found around precapillary arterioles, express α-SMA and may have contractile properties. While direct evidence is limited, mild pericyte deficiency has been linked to increased red blood cell velocity, suggesting a role in vascular resistance. Isolated capillary pericytes exhibit contractile behavior, regulating vasoconstriction or dilation in response to neurotransmitters like noradrenaline and glutamate.[10] In ischemic conditions, pericytes may constrict due to ATP depletion, leading to impaired ion pump function and elevated intracellular calcium levels. Some studies identified capillary pericytes based only on vessel size (<10 μm) and NG2/PDGFRβ expression, without confirming α-SMA presence. Since vessels <10 μm include both precapillary arterioles and capillaries, further research is needed to determine whether pericytes on precapillary arterioles exhibit myogenic properties affecting capillary diameter and CBF autoregulation. This could represent a tertiary protective mechanism in cerebral circulation.[10]

## VIII. Interrelationship ICP, CBF, and CPP

Intracranial pressure (ICP) is regulated by multiple interrelated factors, making it essential to consider these influences collectively rather than in isolation. The dynamic interactions between cerebral blood volume, cerebrospinal fluid dynamics, and brain tissue compliance contribute to the complexity of ICP regulation. In some cases, feedback mechanisms are intended to maintain homeostasis can inadvertently worsen brain injury instead of alleviating it, further complicating clinical management. Understanding these intricate relationships

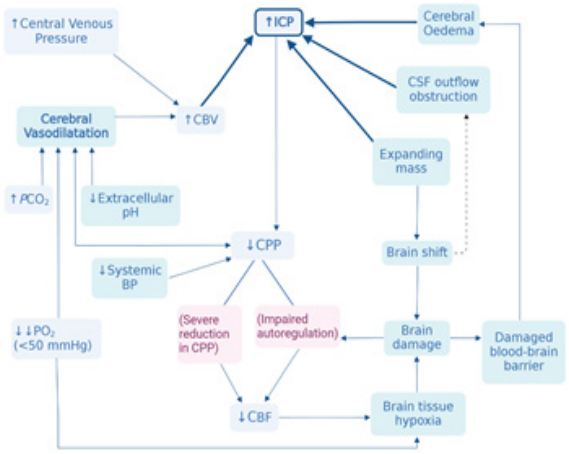


Figure 5. Interrelationship of Intracranial Pressure, Cerebral Blood Flow, and Brain Injury. Increased intracranial pressure (ICP) leads to cerebral edema, cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) outflow obstruction, and brain shift, causing brain damage and hypoxia. ICP elevation also reduces cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP), which when severe or accompanied by impaired autoregulation, decreases cerebral blood flow (CBF), worsening hypoxia. Cerebral vasodilation, triggered by increased partial pressure of carbon dioxide ($pCO_2$) and decreases partial pressure of oxygen ($pO_2$), further raises cerebral blood volume (CBV) and ICP. This vicious cycle can damage the blood-brain barrier, exacerbating brain injury.

is crucial for effective intervention and the prevention of secondary neurological damage.[9]

Intracranial pressure (ICP) is regulated by intracranial compliance, which reflects the balance between cerebrospinal fluid (CSF), brain tissue, and blood within the rigid skull. An increase in intracranial volume reduces compliance, causing ICP to rise and cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) to decrease. To counter this, compensatory mechanisms, such as CSF displacement into the spinal subarachnoid space, help stabilize ICP. However, excessive volume increases from edema, hemorrhage, or space-occupying lesions can overwhelm these mechanisms, leading to a dangerous ICP rise. Cerebral blood flow (CBF) plays a key role in ICP homeostasis, with autoregulation ensuring stable perfusion despite physiological fluctuations.

Autoregulation maintains cerebral blood flow (CBF) by adjusting vessel diameter, vasodilation increases CBF when pressure drops, while vasoconstriction reduces it when pressure rises, stabilizing intracranial pressure (ICP) and cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP). Since ICP remains low under normal conditions, CPP is primarily influenced by mean arterial pressure (MAP), which fluctuates with daily activities but does not significantly impact CPP if ICP is stable. Autoregulation keeps CBF and CPP stable within a MAP range of 50–150 mmHg through compensatory vascular adjustments. In hypertensive patients, the autoregulatory threshold shifts, requiring individualized MAP considerations to maintain optimal cerebral perfusion. Understanding this relationship is essential for managing intracranial pathologies and hemodynamic imbalances.[7]

## IX. Autoregulation Disruption in TBI

In traumatic brain injury (TBI), particularly in moderate to severe cases, cerebral autoregulation (CAR) is frequently compromised by a series of interrelated mechanisms. Initially, the primary injury—resulting from direct trauma—causes damage to both brain tissue and the cerebral vasculature. This initial damage initiates a cascade of secondary responses, including excessive neurotransmitter release, oxidative stress, and inflammation.

These secondary processes inflict further injury on the endothelial cells lining the blood vessels and disrupt their supporting structures, thereby impairs the vessels' ability to rapidly adjust diameter in response to arterial pressure changes.[11] In TBI patients, cerebral autoregulation (CAR) is often disrupted by multiple interrelated mechanisms. Direct trauma can inflict structural damage to cerebral blood vessels, thereby diminishing their capacity to regulate blood flow. Concurrently, an elevation in intracranial pressure (ICP) impedes effective blood perfusion, compounding the risk of further neuronal injury. Autonomic nervous system dysfunction, which modulates vasodilation and vasoconstriction, may further impair CAR.[12] The study categorizes patients into three groups based on the integrity of their autoregulatory responses. Most patients (77%) retained intact autoregulation, maintaining stable cerebral blood flow despite systemic blood pressure fluctuations. A distinct subgroup (15%) demonstrated a delayed autoregulatory response, with an approximate lag of two seconds before blood flow adjustments occurred. In contrast, 8% showed impaired autoregulation, making cerebral blood flow directly dependent on blood pressure changes, increasing the risk of hypoxia or hyperperfusion.[12]

These differences in autoregulatory efficiency have significant prognostic implications. Patients with either intact or delayed autoregulation generally experienced higher survival rates and more favorable neurological outcomes at six months post-injury compared to those with impaired autoregulation, who showed a higher incidence of long-term deficits. This suggests that even a delayed response in CAR may confer some degree of protection against the deleterious effects of blood pressure fluctuations.[12] In short, the findings indicate that in TBI, cerebral autoregulation is not entirely lost in every instance but may merely be delayed. Recognizing this distinction is critical for clinical management, as therapeutic strategies that optimize cerebral

perfusion pressure (CPP) could potentially enhance neurological outcomes by supporting even a partially functioning autoregulatory system.[12] In other way, the inflammatory response associated with TBI often leads to endothelial dysfunction.

When the endothelium is damaged, the production of key vasodilators, such as nitric oxide, is diminished. Since nitric oxide plays a crucial role in maintaining the balance between vasoconstriction and vasodilation, its reduced synthesis hampers the blood vessels' capacity to respond effectively to fluctuations in blood pressure.[11] Another contributing factor is the disturbance of the myogenic response. This intrinsic response allows blood vessels to react automatically to changes in intraluminal pressure by contracting or relaxing. In TBI, damage to smooth muscle cells and disrupted neural input delay or abolish this response, making cerebral blood flow more dependent on systemic pressure variations.[11] TBI often leads to increased intracranial pressure (ICP) due to cerebral edema, reducing cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) and impairing blood flow regulation. This increases the risk of ischemia from inadequate oxygen delivery and hyperperfusion, which may worsen edema or cause hemorrhage. Additionally, some TBI patients experience a delayed autoregulatory response, where blood vessels take about two seconds to adjust, making cerebral blood flow vulnerable to transient blood pressure fluctuations and increasing the risk of secondary brain injury.[11] TBI often disrupts the brain's intrinsic pressure-reflow control, exacerbating secondary injury.

In practice, impaired cerebral autoregulation CAR after TBI is linked to markedly worse neurological outcomes.[13] For example, pediatric TBI studies found that higher PRx (Pressure Reactivity index) values (indicating poor CAR) were significantly more common in patients with unfavorable outcomes; children with poor recovery spent more time with CPP below their computed optimal CPP than those with good recovery.[14] This pattern echoes adult TBI findings: uncontrolled or delayed autoregulatory responses correlate with lower Glasgow Coma Scores and higher mortality.[13,15] Trauma-induced subarachnoid hemorrhage (SAH) as seen in severe head injury, produces similar microvascular derangements. Recent reviews note that SAH causes sustained CA impairment, which independently predicts delayed cerebral ischemia and long-term disability.[15]

In summary, a failing autoregulatory mechanism portends poor outcome in both TBI and SAH, highlighting CA integrity as a critical prognostic indicator.[13,15] Recognizing this link, clinicians have pursued autoregulation-guided management. The Brain Trauma Foundation's fixed CPP target (60–70 mmHg) does not account for patient specific CAR status.[16] In response, the PRx has been developed to continuously quantify CAR: PRx is the moving correlation between slow waves of arterial blood pressure and ICP, with values >0.25–0.3 signaling impaired CAR.[14,16] Plotting PRx against CPP typically yields a U-shaped curve, whose nadir defines each patient's optimal CPP, the CPP associated with most stable autoregulation.[14,16] Multiple observational studies report that maintaining CPP near optimal CPP improves outcomes: patients whose CPP consistently exceeded their personal optimal CPP by ≥10 mmHg had higher rates of favorable recovery.[14] Notably, recent large-scale data confirm an asymmetric effect: modest CPP drops below optimal CPP were strongly predictive of worse outcome, whereas modest CPP elevations above optimal CPP showed no association with harm.[17] In practice, each 1–2 mmHg of hourly CPP spent below optimal CPP raised mortality odds by ~4–11%.[17] These findings underline a shift toward individualized perfusion targets: current evidence favors avoiding CPP below the lower limit of autoregulation (LLA) and suggests using optimal CPP as a dynamic lower bound.[16,17]

Emerging clinical trials support this approach. The recent COGiTATE feasibility RCT randomized 60 severe TBI patients to PRx-guided CPP versus standard CPP targets.[18] CAR guided management was found feasible and safe: patients in the intervention arm spent a significantly higher percentage of time within 5 mmHg of their optimal CPP without increased therapy intensity.[18] Although underpowered for hard outcomes, this

trial and related studies (e.g. Tas et al., 2021) indicate that autoregulation-oriented protocols can be implemented in neurocritical care.[18]

Retrospective analyses further suggest that, on average, aligning CPP with optimal CPP yields better six-month neurological recovery than adherence to fixed targets.[16] Experimental models have elucidated key pathways driving autoregulatory breakdown after TBI. In translational pig studies, fluid percussion injury triggers a cascade of vasoactive mediators and inflammation that impair CA. Within minutes of injury, the spasmogen endothelin-1 (ET-1) and the mitogen-activated protein kinase ERK1/2 are released, leading to dysfunctional myogenic vasodilation.[13] Concurrently, pro-inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-6 (IL-6) increase in the cerebrospinal fluid and further suppress autoregulationp.[13] Notably, these effects show age and sex dependence: juvenile (vs. adult) and male (vs. female) animals exhibit greater ET-1/ERK upregulation and more profound CAR impairmentp.[13] In practical terms, low CPP or hypotension in the context of impaired autoregulation produces critical hypoperfusion and neuronal injury, whereas fixed BP targets may be relatively safer if CAR is intact. Importantly, these models also identify protective interventions. For example, inhaled nitric oxide (iNO) given after experimental TBI has been shown to preserve autoregulatory responsiveness by blocking the upregulation of IL-6, ET-1, and ERK.13 Similarly, vasoactive agents differ in their effects on autoregulation: dopamine and norepinephrine (in juvenile pig models) prevented post TBI CAR loss and reduced hippocampal necrosis by attenuating ERK/IL-6 signaling.[13]

These findings suggest that choice of inotropic support can modulate CAR status. In the clinical setting, such mechanistic insights reinforce the concept of neurovascular unit protection. Therapeutic strategies that stabilize vascular signaling (e.g. endothelin-receptor antagonists, ERK inhibitors, or tailored CPP elevation) may help maintain CBF despite injury. In SAH as well, microvascular dysfunction is a therapeutic target: beyond vasospasm treatment, optimizing CPP in accordance with autoregulatory limits is increasingly emphasized (e.g. elevating MAP to improve CBF only when autoregulation is impaired).[15]

In summary, recent evidence (2015–2025) underscores that intact cerebrovascular autoregulation is a critical determinant of survival and recovery after TBI (and SAH). Clinical studies consistently link autoregulatory status – assessed by PRx or similar measures – to outcomes such as mortality and Glasgow scores.[13,14] Management strategies have accordingly evolved toward autoregulation-guided therapy: personalized optimal CPP targets and continuous PRx monitoring are now used to minimize episodes of pressure-passive flow. Experimental work has mapped the underlying biology (ET-1, ERK, IL-6 pathways) and demonstrated that specific interventions (e.g. iNO, optimal vasopressor selection) can mitigate CAR failure.[13] Together, these advances suggest that combining multimodal monitoring with mechanistic therapies may improve neurologic recovery and survival in severe TBI.

## X. Clinical Application

Invasive assessment of cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) in neurocritical care fundamentally relies on continuous, high-fidelity measurements of mean arterial pressure (MAP) and intracranial pressure (ICP). CPP is calculated as MAP − ICP, making it directly measurable whenever an arterial line and an invasive ICP monitor (intraparenchymal probe or an external ventricular drain) are in place. Routine invasive ICP monitoring remains the clinical standard for detecting dangerously high ICP and for calculating CPP. This invasive signal acquisition also forms the basis for cerebrovascular autoregulation assessment, as spontaneous slow-wave fluctuations in MAP and ICP are analyzed to infer vascular reactivity.[19]

Invasive cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP) monitoring provides several key advantages, particularly in terms of directness and measurement accuracy. Direct measurement of ventricular or parenchymal intracranial pressure

(ICP) in combination with arterial blood pressure offers the highest fidelity for CPP calculation and pressure reactivity index (PRx) assessment, and is therefore considered the gold standard for CPP derivation.[19] In addition, invasive monitoring enables continuous, high-resolution, beat-to-beat data acquisition, allowing real-time slow-wave and autoregulatory analyses necessary for PRx and CPP evaluation.[20]

From a physiological standpoint, invasive CPP monitoring supports the use of dynamic cerebrovascular indices, such as PRx, and facilitates individualized CPP targets that have been correlated with clinical outcomes.[20] The availability of real-time signals allows immediate therapeutic interventions, including cerebrospinal fluid drainage and vasopressor titration, enhancing clinical actionability in neurocritical care settings.[20] When appropriately managed, complication rates are generally acceptable in patients with severe traumatic brain injury, and invasive monitoring remains the reference standard for CPP assessment due to its superior measurement precision.[19]

Nevertheless, invasive CPP monitoring is associated with important limitations. The invasive nature of the technique introduces risks of hemorrhage and infection, as well as potential signal drift or bias related to local probe placement.[19] Continuous monitoring requires strict signal quality control, and device downtime may interrupt data acquisition and computational analyses.[20] Furthermore, evidence supporting physiologic indices derived from invasive monitoring is predominantly observational, with limited randomized controlled trial data. Therapeutic interventions guided by invasive monitoring may also impose systemic risks, such as fluid overload and cardiac stress.[20] Finally, the approach requires neurosurgical expertise and intensive care resources, and carries risks of device malfunction and increased cost. Although noninvasive surrogates continue to improve, they remain less validated for continuous physiologic indices compared with invasive methods.

Among invasive indices derived from these signals, the most widely studied is the Pressure Reactivity Index (PRx), computed as a moving correlation coefficient between slow (tens of seconds to minutes) changes in MAP and concurrent changes in ICP. A positive PRx suggests that ICP passively follows MAP (impaired autoregulation), while a negative or near-zero PRx reflects intact vasoreactivity. In addition to the physiologic principles, clinical application depends on the invasive device used for ICP monitoring and data acquisition. Common devices include the EVD, intraparenchymal probes, subarachnoid or epidural bolts, brain tissue oxygen probes ($PbtO_2$), jugular bulb oximetry ($SjvO_2$), and cerebral microdialysis (CMD). Each device has unique technical properties, advantages, and limitations in terms of accuracy, calibration, sampling location, therapeutic capability, and complication profile, which influence both the quality of CPP data and the reliability of derived indices such as PRx.[19,20] Invasive neuromonitoring devices for cerebral perfusion and metabolism differ in their measurement targets, clinical utility, and inherent limitations. External ventricular drains (EVDs) measure ventricular intracranial pressure (ICP) and allow cerebrospinal fluid drainage, making them the gold standard for ventricular pressure monitoring and therapeutic decompression.[19] However, their use is technically demanding and associated with risks of hemorrhage and infection, and catheter obstruction may occur.[19]

Intraparenchymal probes provide continuous local ICP measurements and are easier to place at the bedside, offering reliable real-time signal acquisition.[19] Their limitations include localized measurement without the ability for recalibration and the absence of cerebrospinal fluid drainage capability.[19] Subarachnoid or epidural bolts offer a minimally invasive alternative for ICP monitoring; however, they tend to underestimate true ICP values, are prone to blockage, and are largely considered obsolete in contemporary practice.[20] Beyond pressure monitoring, brain tissue oxygen ($PbtO_2$) probes assess local cerebral oxygenation and allow direct detection of cortical hypoxia through continuous measurements. Despite their clinical relevance, these probes provide

focal information, carry risks of hemorrhage and infection, and remain supported by ongoing and evolving clinical trial evidence.[20] Jugular bulb oximetry ($SjvO_2$) evaluates global cerebral oxygen saturation, reflecting whole-brain oxygen balance and enabling trend monitoring over time. Nevertheless, it lacks sensitivity to regional ischemia and is associated with complications related to neck catheterization.[20]

Cerebral microdialysis (CMD) offers insight into cerebral metabolism by measuring extracellular metabolites, such as the lactate–pyruvate ratio, thereby supporting research applications and therapeutic guidance. Its limitations include low sampling frequency, complex data interpretation, and the inherently focal nature of the measurements.[20] The clinical evidence supporting autoregulation-guided CPP targeting is promising but not yet definitive. Observational studies have linked impaired PRx with higher mortality and poor outcomes, while individualized CPP targets near CPP_opt are associated with physiologic improvement and plausible outcome benefits across various brain injuries, including TBI, subarachnoid hemorrhage, and intracerebral hemorrhage. However, methodological heterogeneity in deriving PRx/CPP_opt, the absence of large prospective randomized outcome trials, and potential risks from aggressive hemodynamic interventions such as fluid overload or cardiac stress limit current adoption as a universal standard of care.[20]

In practice, invasive CPP/autoregulation assessment is most powerful when integrated into multimodal neuromonitoring (ICP waveform analysis, brain tissue oxygenation [$PbtO_2$], continuous EEG, and transcranial Doppler where available). Centers using PRx/CPP_opt emphasize data quality (artifact removal, validated signal processing), individualized decision-making, and careful balancing of risks from interventions used to shift CPP. For research or clinical implementation, rely on peer-reviewed protocols and multicenter trial results as they become available; the literature and recent reviews provide searchable, citable methods and outcome analyses for both the PRx concept and CPP_opt strategies.[20]

## XI. Conclusion

Cerebral autoregulation (CAR) is fundamental to sustaining adequate cerebral blood flow (CBF) despite fluctuations in systemic pressure. In moderate-to-severe traumatic brain injury (TBI) and trauma-related subarachnoid hemorrhage (SAH), CAR is often impaired, partially or completely, resulting in a pressure-passive circulation that exposes the brain to the dual risks of hypoperfusion and hyperemia. Clinical and experimental data consistently associate impaired CAR, as quantified by indices such as the pressure reactivity index (PRx), with higher intracranial pressure (ICP), reduced cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP), increased secondary injury, and poorer neurological outcomes.

Over the past decade, management strategies have shifted from fixed CPP thresholds toward individualized, autoregulation-guided approaches. Continuous PRx monitoring enables determination of a patient-specific optimal CPP (CPP_opt), with mounting evidence that maintaining CPP close to CPP_opt improves survival and functional recovery. Time spent below CPP_opt correlates strongly with poor prognosis, while moderate elevations above this value appear relatively safe. Mechanistic research has identified inflammatory and vasoactive pathways including endothelin-1 (ET-1), ERK1/2, and interleukin-6 (IL-6), as drivers of autoregulatory breakdown, opening avenues for targeted intervention. Translational studies suggest that agents such as inhaled nitric oxide and specific vasopressors can attenuate these pathological cascades and preserve cerebrovascular reactivity.

In summary, preserving autoregulation is a pivotal therapeutic goal in TBI care. Autoregulation-guided CPP optimization, supported by continuous multimodal monitoring, offers a physiologically grounded, patient-specific strategy for neuroprotection. Future large-scale randomized trials are essential to validate these

concepts, refine intervention thresholds, and integrate them into standardized neurocritical care protocols, ultimately aiming to improve survival and neurological recovery in patients with acute brain injury.

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