Predictors of Mortality in Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease: A Comprehensive Review

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Received: 28 October 2024, **Accepted:** 17 November 2024, **Published:** 20 November 2024

Abstract

Background: Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a progressive respiratory disorder characterized by persistent airflow limitation, chronic inflammation, and significant systemic manifestations. COPD remains one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide, imposing a substantial burden on healthcare systems and negatively affecting quality of life. Despite advances in pharmacological and nonpharmacological management, mortality rates among COPD patients remain high due to the complex interaction of pulmonary impairment, acute exacerbations, cardiovascular complications, metabolic abnormalities, and systemic inflammation. Therefore, identifying predictors of mortality in COPD patients has become essential for improving prognostic assessment, optimizing therapeutic interventions, and reducing disease-related deaths.

This comprehensive review aims to evaluate and summarize the major predictors associated with mortality in patients with COPD. The review discusses demographic factors, smoking status, pulmonary function impairment, frequency of exacerbations, hypoxemia, hypercapnia, exercise intolerance, nutritional status, systemic inflammation, comorbidities, and multidimensional prognostic indices such as the BODE index. In addition, emerging biomarkers and radiological indicators associated with poor outcomes are highlighted. Particular emphasis is placed on the interaction between respiratory and systemic manifestations, which significantly contribute to disease progression and mortality risk.

Several studies have demonstrated that reduced forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV1), advanced age, low body mass index (BMI), frequent hospitalizations, cardiovascular diseases, and impaired exercise capacity are independently associated with increased mortality in COPD patients. Moreover, systemic inflammatory markers including C-reactive protein (CRP), fibrinogen, and eosinophilic profiles have gained attention as potential prognostic indicators. Multidimensional tools appear to provide superior prognostic accuracy compared with isolated pulmonary function measurements.

In conclusion, mortality in COPD is multifactorial and influenced by both respiratory and extrapulmonary determinants. Comprehensive risk stratification using clinical, functional, laboratory, and imaging parameters is crucial for early identification of high-risk patients. Improved understanding of mortality predictors may facilitate personalized therapeutic strategies and enhance long-term outcomes in COPD patients.

Keywords: *Predictors , Mortality , Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease*

Introduction

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is a major global health problem and one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide. It is characterized by persistent respiratory symptoms and progressive airflow limitation resulting from airway and alveolar abnormalities, most commonly caused by long-term exposure to noxious particles and gases, particularly cigarette smoke. Despite substantial advances in pharmacological and non-pharmacological management, COPD continues to impose a considerable burden on healthcare systems because of recurrent exacerbations, frequent hospitalizations, impaired quality of life, and high mortality rates, particularly among patients with advanced disease and those requiring intensive care admission.[1]

Mortality in COPD is influenced by a complex interaction of pulmonary and extrapulmonary factors rather than the severity of airflow limitation alone. Although forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV_1) has historically been regarded as the principal predictor of prognosis, accumulating evidence indicates that COPD is a heterogeneous disease in which demographic characteristics, exacerbation frequency, respiratory failure, gas exchange abnormalities, systemic inflammation, nutritional status, exercise intolerance, and multiple comorbidities collectively determine survival outcomes.[2,3]

Acute exacerbations of COPD represent one of the strongest predictors of short- and long-term mortality. Patients requiring hospitalization, intensive care unit admission, non-invasive ventilation, or invasive mechanical ventilation have substantially worse outcomes because these events reflect advanced disease severity and limited physiological reserve. In addition, chronic hypoxemia, hypercapnia, pulmonary hypertension, cardiovascular complications, and severe infections further contribute to increased mortality risk.[4,5]

Growing recognition of the multifactorial nature of COPD has led to the development of multidimensional prognostic models that provide more accurate risk stratification than isolated physiological measurements. [6]In addition to established indices such as the BODE index, prognostic tools including DECAF, BAP-65, and CURB-65 have demonstrated important clinical value, particularly in hospitalized patients with acute exacerbations. Furthermore, inflammatory biomarkers such as C-reactive protein, fibrinogen, blood eosinophils, and procalcitonin, together with radiological findings including emphysema severity, consolidation, and pulmonary artery enlargement, have emerged as valuable predictors of adverse outcomes.[7–8]

Despite research, important gaps remain in understanding how individual clinical, laboratory, radiological, and functional predictors interact to influence mortality risk across different COPD phenotypes and clinical settings. Integrating these variables into a comprehensive prognostic framework is essential for improving individualized risk assessment and optimizing clinical decision-making.

This comprehensive review aims to summarize the current evidence regarding predictors of mortality in patients with COPD, with particular emphasis on demographic characteristics, pulmonary impairment, exacerbation severity, biomarkers, comorbidities, radiological features, and multidimensional prognostic scoring systems. The review also discusses the clinical implications of these predictors in improving risk stratification and guiding personalized management strategies

Epidemiology and Global Burden of COPD Mortality

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) remains one of the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide and represents a major challenge to healthcare systems. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), COPD is currently among the top three causes of death globally, accounting for millions of deaths annually.[9] According to the Burden of Obstructive Lung Disease (BOLD) study, COPD affects approximately 10–15% of adults aged ≥40 years worldwide, with prevalence increasing markedly with age and smoking exposure.[10] Importantly, most COPD-related deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, where delayed diagnosis, limited healthcare resources, and inadequate access to preventive and specialized respiratory care contribute to poor clinical outcomes.[11]

The epidemiology of COPD-related mortality reflects the complex interaction between demographic

characteristics, disease severity, healthcare accessibility, and comorbid conditions.[12] Mortality increases progressively with advancing age and is particularly high among patients with severe airflow limitation, recurrent exacerbations, chronic respiratory failure, and multiple systemic comorbidities.[13] Although smoking remains the principal preventable risk factor, mortality is also increasingly recognized among patients with COPD related to biomass fuel exposure, occupational pollutants, and environmental air pollution, particularly in developing countries.[14]

Mortality associated with COPD is multifactorial and often underreported because many deaths occur secondary to cardiovascular disease, respiratory infections, or malignancies rather than direct respiratory failure. Nevertheless, COPD contributes substantially to disability-adjusted life years (DALYs), healthcare expenditures, and repeated hospital admissions. The burden becomes particularly pronounced in advanced disease stages, where recurrent exacerbations, chronic hypoxemia, pulmonary hypertension, and systemic complications significantly increase mortality risk.[15]

Previous hospitalization for acute exacerbation represents one of the strongest predictors of subsequent mortality. Patients experiencing frequent exacerbations often develop accelerated decline in lung function, worsening exercise intolerance, impaired quality of life, and increasing healthcare utilization.[16] Each hospitalization reflects disease progression and reduced physiological reserve, while recurrent admissions are consistently associated with higher risks of respiratory failure, cardiovascular complications, and death. Consequently, hospitalization history has become an important component of contemporary risk stratification in COPD.[17-18]

Advanced age further amplifies mortality risk through reduced pulmonary reserve, immunosenescence, frailty, and the increasing prevalence of cardiovascular disease, diabetes mellitus, chronic kidney disease, osteoporosis, and malignancy.[19] These comorbid conditions frequently coexist and interact with COPD, contributing substantially to adverse outcomes independent of airflow limitation alone. Similarly, socioeconomic disadvantage, limited education, poor treatment adherence, delayed diagnosis, and restricted access to healthcare services are associated with increased hospitalization rates and poorer long-term survival.[20–21]

The growing burden of COPD-related mortality highlights the need for early identification of high-risk patients using comprehensive clinical assessment rather than reliance on spirometric severity alone.[22] Contemporary evidence supports integrating demographic characteristics, exacerbation history, physiological impairment, laboratory biomarkers, radiological findings, and multidimensional prognostic indices to improve mortality prediction and guide individualized management strategies. Understanding these epidemiological patterns provides the foundation for interpreting the clinical predictors of mortality discussed in the following sections.[23]

Pulmonary Function, Symptoms, and Functional Predictors of Mortality

Airflow limitation remains one of the most established predictors of mortality in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). Forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV_1) has traditionally been used to classify disease severity and estimate prognosis because progressive airflow obstruction reflects increasing structural lung damage and ventilatory impairment. Nevertheless, substantial heterogeneity exists among patients with similar spirometric values, indicating that FEV_1 alone cannot adequately predict survival. Patients with comparable degrees of airflow limitation may differ considerably in symptom burden, exacerbation frequency, exercise tolerance, nutritional status, gas exchange abnormalities, and comorbidities. Consequently, spirometry should be interpreted within a comprehensive multidimensional clinical assessment rather than as an isolated predictor of mortality.[24]

Dyspnea is one of the strongest clinical predictors of adverse outcomes because it reflects the overall functional impact of COPD more accurately than spirometric impairment alone. The modified Medical Research Council (mMRC) dyspnea scale is widely used to quantify breathlessness during daily activities and has consistently demonstrated a strong association with hospitalization and mortality. Severe dyspnea reflects the combined effects of airflow limitation, dynamic hyperinflation, respiratory muscle dysfunction, impaired gas exchange, cardiovascular impairment, and skeletal muscle weakness,

explaining why patients with similar FEV_1 values may experience markedly different clinical outcomes.[25-26]

Exercise capacity is another major determinant of survival in COPD. The six-minute walk distance (6MWD) provides an integrated assessment of pulmonary function, cardiovascular reserve, peripheral muscle performance, and oxygen transport. Reduced exercise capacity is independently associated with increased hospitalization, recurrent exacerbations, and mortality. Declining functional performance often reflects progressive systemic involvement of COPD and therefore provides prognostic information beyond conventional pulmonary function tests.[27]

Nutritional status also plays a crucial role in determining prognosis. Low body mass index (BMI), sarcopenia, and cachexia are consistently associated with increased mortality because they indicate systemic inflammation, increased metabolic demand, respiratory muscle weakness, and reduced physiological reserve. Malnutrition impairs immune function, delays recovery following exacerbations, and increases susceptibility to respiratory failure. Accordingly, routine nutritional assessment should be considered an essential component of mortality risk stratification, particularly in patients with advanced disease.[28]

Sarcopenia is increasingly recognized as an important predictor of adverse outcomes in COPD. Chronic systemic inflammation, physical inactivity, hypoxemia, corticosteroid exposure, and nutritional depletion contribute to progressive skeletal muscle loss and reduced respiratory muscle strength. Patients with sarcopenia exhibit poorer exercise capacity, increased frailty, frequent hospitalizations, and higher mortality. Early recognition through nutritional and functional assessment may facilitate timely interventions aimed at improving prognosis.[28]

Acute exacerbations represent one of the strongest functional predictors of mortality. Frequent exacerbations accelerate lung function decline, worsen health-related quality of life, increase systemic inflammation, and substantially raise the likelihood of hospitalization and respiratory failure. Patients experiencing recurrent severe exacerbations constitute a high-risk phenotype characterized by unstable disease progression and poor long-term survival. Preventing exacerbations remains one of the principal goals of COPD management because each hospitalization is associated with progressively increasing mortality risk.[29]

Gas exchange abnormalities provide additional prognostic information. Persistent hypoxemia indicates advanced ventilation-perfusion mismatch, emphysema, pulmonary vascular disease, or chronic respiratory failure and is strongly associated with pulmonary hypertension, right ventricular dysfunction, impaired exercise capacity, and increased mortality. Likewise, chronic hypercapnia reflects ventilatory pump failure and severe physiological impairment and is associated with poor outcomes, particularly among patients requiring ventilatory support during acute exacerbations. Recognition of these abnormalities is therefore fundamental for identifying patients at increased risk of adverse clinical outcomes.[30]

Because COPD is a multisystem disease, isolated physiological measurements are insufficient for accurate prognostic assessment. Multidimensional indices such as the BODE index, which incorporates body mass index, airflow obstruction, dyspnea severity, and exercise capacity, consistently outperform FEV_1 alone in predicting mortality. By integrating pulmonary and systemic manifestations, the BODE index provides a more comprehensive evaluation of disease severity and assists clinicians in identifying patients who may benefit from closer follow-up, pulmonary rehabilitation, nutritional intervention, and advanced therapeutic strategies.[31]

Exacerbation-Related and Hospitalization Predictors of Mortality

Acute exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (AECOPD) represent critical events in the natural history of the disease and are among the strongest predictors of both short- and long-term mortality. These episodes are characterized by an acute worsening of respiratory symptoms requiring additional treatment and are commonly precipitated by bacterial or viral infections, environmental pollutants, or progression of the underlying disease. Beyond causing transient clinical deterioration,

exacerbations accelerate lung function decline, increase systemic inflammation, reduce exercise capacity, and contribute to irreversible disease progression.[30]

The frequency and severity of exacerbations have consistently been identified as major determinants of prognosis. Patients experiencing two or more exacerbations annually, particularly those requiring hospitalization, exhibit significantly higher risks of recurrent admissions, respiratory failure, cardiovascular complications, and death. Repeated exacerbations define a high-risk clinical phenotype characterized by persistent airway inflammation, impaired physiological reserve, and accelerated functional decline. Consequently, exacerbation history has become an essential component of contemporary mortality risk assessment in COPD.[31]

Hospitalization for AECOPD carries substantial prognostic significance because it usually reflects advanced disease severity and failure of outpatient management. Patients admitted with severe exacerbations frequently present with hypoxemia, hypercapnia, respiratory acidosis, systemic inflammation, and multiple comorbidities, all of which contribute to adverse outcomes. Furthermore, each subsequent hospitalization is associated with progressively increasing mortality, emphasizing that previous admission history should be regarded as an independent marker of poor prognosis rather than merely a consequence of disease severity.[32]

The period immediately following hospital discharge represents one of the most vulnerable phases in the clinical course of COPD. Persistent airway inflammation, incomplete physiological recovery, impaired functional status, poor adherence to therapy, and unresolved comorbidities contribute to high rates of early readmission and mortality. Structured post-discharge follow-up, optimization of inhaled therapy, assessment of oxygen requirements, pulmonary rehabilitation, smoking cessation, and comprehensive management of comorbid conditions are therefore essential to improve long-term outcomes.[33]

Acute respiratory failure remains one of the strongest predictors of mortality during COPD exacerbations. Hypercapnic respiratory failure accompanied by respiratory acidosis reflects advanced ventilatory pump dysfunction and severe airflow limitation. Patients requiring non-invasive ventilation (NIV) or invasive mechanical ventilation (IMV) have substantially higher mortality rates because the need for ventilatory support indicates advanced physiological compromise. Although NIV has significantly improved outcomes in appropriately selected patients by reducing intubation rates and in-hospital mortality, failure of NIV or the requirement for invasive mechanical ventilation remains associated with poor prognosis.[34]

Among critically ill patients with acute exacerbations of COPD admitted to the intensive care unit, early identification of factors associated with NIV failure is particularly important because delayed intubation is consistently associated with increased in-hospital mortality. Several admission characteristics have been identified as predictors of poor outcomes, including severe respiratory acidosis, persistent hypercapnia despite NIV, altered mental status, tachypnea, hemodynamic instability, and extensive pulmonary consolidation. Elevated inflammatory biomarkers, particularly C-reactive protein and procalcitonin, together with leukocytosis and severe hypoxemia, further indicate a higher likelihood of NIV failure and adverse clinical outcomes. The development of complications such as sepsis, acute respiratory distress syndrome, pneumothorax, or cardiac arrhythmias during ICU admission substantially increases mortality risk. These findings highlight that successful management of critically ill AECOPD patients requires continuous reassessment during the first hours of NIV, with prompt escalation to invasive mechanical ventilation when clinical deterioration persists. Consequently, integrating clinical findings, laboratory parameters, radiological abnormalities, and validated prognostic scores such as DECAF and BAP-65 may improve early recognition of high-risk patients and support timely therapeutic decision-making in the ICU setting.[35]

Respiratory infections, particularly pneumonia, are major contributors to mortality during acute exacerbations. The coexistence of pneumonia with AECOPD markedly increases the risks of respiratory failure, sepsis, prolonged hospitalization, intensive care admission, and death. COPD-related structural airway abnormalities, impaired mucociliary clearance, chronic airway inflammation, and frequent

corticosteroid exposure predispose patients to severe lower respiratory tract infections. Accordingly, distinguishing pneumonic from non-pneumonic exacerbations is clinically important because these patients generally require more intensive monitoring and carry substantially worse outcomes.[36]

In addition to respiratory complications, acute exacerbations frequently precipitate cardiovascular events including myocardial infarction, acute heart failure, atrial fibrillation, and pulmonary embolism. Systemic inflammation, hypoxemia, sympathetic activation, endothelial dysfunction, and increased myocardial oxygen demand contribute to these complications, which account for a considerable proportion of deaths among hospitalized COPD patients. Therefore, comprehensive evaluation during exacerbations should extend beyond respiratory assessment to include early recognition and management of cardiovascular and thromboembolic complications.[37]

Cardiovascular events during or after exacerbations contribute substantially to mortality. Exacerbations increase systemic inflammation, sympathetic activity, platelet activation, hypoxemia, and myocardial oxygen demand. These mechanisms may precipitate myocardial infarction, arrhythmias, acute heart failure, and pulmonary embolism. Because symptoms such as dyspnea and chest discomfort may overlap between COPD exacerbation and cardiovascular disease, clinicians should maintain a high index of suspicion. Assessment of electrocardiography, cardiac biomarkers, echocardiography, and thromboembolic risk may be necessary in selected high-risk patients.[38]

Finally, baseline frailty, malnutrition, physical inactivity, and impaired functional capacity substantially influence recovery following hospitalization. Frail patients often experience prolonged rehabilitation, persistent disability, recurrent admissions, and increased mortality despite apparent stabilization of respiratory symptoms. These observations reinforce the concept that mortality following AECOPD reflects the interaction between acute respiratory deterioration and the patient's underlying physiological reserve rather than the severity of airflow obstruction alone.

Systemic Inflammation, Biomarkers, and Comorbidities as Predictors of Mortality

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is increasingly recognized as a systemic inflammatory disorder extending beyond the lungs. Persistent inflammation contributes to the progression of pulmonary damage while simultaneously affecting multiple extrapulmonary organs, thereby increasing morbidity and mortality. Cigarette smoke exposure, recurrent exacerbations, oxidative stress, chronic hypoxemia, and respiratory infections stimulate the release of inflammatory mediators including C-reactive protein (CRP), interleukin-6, tumor necrosis factor-α, fibrinogen, and other acute-phase reactants. Sustained systemic inflammation promotes endothelial dysfunction, skeletal muscle wasting, cardiovascular disease, metabolic abnormalities, and impaired immune responses, all of which adversely affect survival.[38]

Among inflammatory biomarkers, C-reactive protein (CRP) remains one of the most extensively investigated predictors of mortality in COPD. Elevated CRP concentrations correlate with increased disease severity, frequent exacerbations, prolonged hospitalization, respiratory failure, and all-cause mortality. Although CRP is not disease-specific, its widespread availability, reproducibility, and association with systemic inflammatory burden make it a valuable biomarker for identifying patients at increased risk of adverse outcomes.[39]

Fibrinogen has also emerged as an important prognostic biomarker reflecting both systemic inflammation and prothrombotic activity. Elevated plasma fibrinogen levels are associated with accelerated lung function decline, recurrent exacerbations, cardiovascular complications, and increased mortality. Because COPD is frequently accompanied by vascular dysfunction and thromboembolic events, fibrinogen provides additional prognostic information beyond conventional inflammatory markers and has been incorporated into several COPD outcome studies.[40]

Blood eosinophil count has gained considerable attention because of its dual role as a prognostic and therapeutic biomarker. Higher eosinophil counts may identify patients who respond favorably to inhaled corticosteroids, whereas eosinopenia during acute exacerbations has been associated with severe bacterial infections, intensive care admission, sepsis, and increased in-hospital mortality. These observations suggest that eosinophil count may provide clinically useful information when interpreted

within the overall clinical context rather than as an isolated marker.[41]

Other laboratory parameters have also demonstrated prognostic significance during acute exacerbations. Elevated total leukocyte count, neutrophilia, and procalcitonin frequently reflect severe bacterial infection and exaggerated systemic inflammatory responses, while persistent leukocytosis has been associated with respiratory failure, prolonged hospitalization, and poor clinical outcomes. These routinely available laboratory markers may therefore complement established inflammatory biomarkers in identifying patients at increased mortality risk.

Microbiological findings also provide important prognostic information during acute exacerbations of COPD. Bacterial infections remain the leading cause of severe exacerbations requiring hospitalization and are closely associated with respiratory failure and in-hospital mortality. Several studies have shown that the isolation of potentially pathogenic microorganisms, particularly Gram-negative bacteria such as Klebsiella pneumoniae and Pseudomonas aeruginosa, is associated with more severe disease, prolonged hospitalization, higher rates of intensive care admission, and increased mortality. Positive blood cultures, although less common than sputum culture positivity, usually indicate systemic dissemination of infection and are associated with sepsis, multiorgan dysfunction, and poor clinical outcomes. Furthermore, multidrug-resistant organisms represent an additional challenge because they frequently lead to delayed appropriate antimicrobial therapy and treatment failure. Therefore, microbiological evaluation, including sputum and blood cultures when clinically indicated, should be considered an integral component of early risk assessment and therapeutic decision-making in hospitalized patients with acute exacerbations of COPD.[42]

Oxidative stress further contributes to disease progression by promoting chronic airway inflammation, corticosteroid resistance, endothelial injury, and skeletal muscle dysfunction. Excessive production of reactive oxygen species damages cellular proteins, lipids, and DNA, amplifying inflammatory pathways and accelerating pulmonary and systemic deterioration. Although biomarkers of oxidative stress remain largely investigational, they continue to provide important insights into the mechanisms underlying disease progression and mortality.[43]

Comorbidities substantially influence survival and frequently account for a considerable proportion of deaths among patients with COPD. Cardiovascular diseases including ischemic heart disease, heart failure, atrial fibrillation, hypertension, and pulmonary hypertension are particularly important because they share common pathogenic mechanisms such as systemic inflammation, smoking, oxidative stress, and chronic hypoxemia. These conditions may worsen independently of respiratory disease severity and should therefore be actively identified and managed during routine clinical care.[44]

Pulmonary hypertension is a particularly serious complication associated with advanced COPD and poor prognosis. Chronic hypoxic vasoconstriction, vascular remodeling, endothelial dysfunction, and destruction of pulmonary capillary beds contribute to elevated pulmonary arterial pressure. The development of pulmonary hypertension increases right ventricular workload and may eventually lead to cor pulmonale and right-sided heart failure. COPD patients with pulmonary hypertension typically exhibit more severe dyspnea, reduced exercise tolerance, greater oxygen dependence, and increased mortality.[45]

Metabolic disorders, chronic kidney disease, diabetes mellitus, osteoporosis, sarcopenia, and frailty further contribute to poor outcomes by reducing physiological reserve and increasing vulnerability to acute illness. Similarly, anxiety and depression adversely affect treatment adherence, participation in pulmonary rehabilitation, and health-related quality of life, leading to increased hospitalization and mortality. Lung cancer also remains a major cause of death in COPD because chronic inflammation and smoking exposure substantially increase the risk of malignant transformation. Collectively, these observations emphasize that mortality in COPD reflects the combined impact of pulmonary dysfunction, systemic inflammation, laboratory abnormalities, and multiple comorbid conditions rather than respiratory impairment alone.[46–47]

Imaging, Radiological Phenotypes, and Advanced Prognostic Indicators

Radiological assessment has become an integral component of prognostic evaluation in chronic

obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), providing structural information that complements clinical assessment, pulmonary function testing, and laboratory biomarkers. Chest computed tomography (CT) not only characterizes the extent of emphysema and airway remodeling but also identifies radiological abnormalities associated with disease progression, recurrent exacerbations, respiratory failure, and mortality. Consequently, imaging findings should be interpreted alongside clinical and physiological parameters to achieve more accurate risk stratification.[48]

The extent and distribution of emphysema remain among the most important radiological predictors of mortality. Extensive emphysematous destruction results in loss of alveolar surface area, impaired gas exchange, dynamic hyperinflation, and progressive respiratory insufficiency. Quantitative CT assessment of emphysema has consistently demonstrated independent associations with impaired exercise capacity, chronic hypoxemia, reduced diffusion capacity, frequent exacerbations, and increased mortality, even among patients with comparable spirometric impairment.[49]

Airway-predominant disease represents another important radiological phenotype. Increased airway wall thickness, mucus plugging, and small-airway remodeling are associated with persistent airflow limitation, chronic bronchitis, recurrent respiratory infections, and frequent exacerbations. Patients with airway-predominant COPD often exhibit greater symptom burden and repeated hospitalizations despite less extensive emphysema, highlighting the heterogeneity of structural lung abnormalities and their influence on clinical outcomes.[50]

Pulmonary vascular abnormalities identified by CT also provide valuable prognostic information. Enlargement of the pulmonary artery, particularly an increased pulmonary artery-to-aorta diameter ratio, has been associated with pulmonary hypertension, severe exacerbations, intensive care admission, and increased mortality. Pulmonary vascular remodeling frequently precedes overt right ventricular dysfunction, making CT an important tool for early identification of high-risk patients with disproportionate pulmonary vascular involvement.[51]

Beyond emphysema and pulmonary vascular abnormalities, several radiological findings observed during acute exacerbations have important prognostic implications. Pulmonary consolidation, pleural effusion, pneumothorax, and features of pulmonary edema frequently indicate severe underlying pathology and are associated with respiratory failure, prolonged hospitalization, intensive care admission, and increased in-hospital mortality. Recognition of these imaging abnormalities is essential because they often reflect complications requiring immediate therapeutic intervention and are consistently associated with poorer clinical outcomes.

Diffusing capacity for carbon monoxide (DLCO) provides additional prognostic information by reflecting the integrity of the alveolar-capillary membrane. Markedly reduced DLCO is commonly observed in advanced emphysema and pulmonary vascular disease and correlates with exertional hypoxemia, impaired exercise tolerance, and poor survival. Similarly, lung hyperinflation, assessed by inspiratory capacity-to-total lung capacity ratio or CT-derived lung volumes, contributes significantly to dyspnea, respiratory muscle dysfunction, cardiovascular impairment, and mortality. These physiological and radiological measurements therefore complement conventional spirometry in identifying patients at increased risk of adverse outcomes.[52,53]

Overall, radiological evaluation extends beyond confirming the diagnosis of COPD and provides clinically meaningful prognostic information regarding structural lung damage, vascular involvement, acute complications, and disease phenotype. Integrating imaging findings with clinical characteristics, laboratory biomarkers, pulmonary function, and multidimensional prognostic scores offers a more comprehensive approach to mortality prediction and individualized patient management.

Prognostic Indices and Multidimensional Mortality Assessment

The heterogeneous nature of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) has highlighted the limitations of relying on a single clinical or physiological parameter to predict mortality. Although airflow limitation measured by forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV_1) remains an important indicator of disease severity, it does not adequately reflect symptom burden, systemic manifestations, exacerbation frequency, functional impairment, or comorbidity burden. Consequently,

multidimensional prognostic models have been developed to provide a more comprehensive assessment of mortality risk and support individualized clinical decision-making.[54]

The BODE index remains the most extensively validated multidimensional prognostic tool in COPD. By integrating body mass index, airflow obstruction, dyspnea severity, and exercise capacity, the BODE index captures both pulmonary impairment and systemic consequences of the disease. Numerous studies have demonstrated that higher BODE scores are associated with increased hospitalization, respiratory failure, and all-cause mortality, consistently outperforming FEV_1 alone in predicting long-term outcomes.[55]

To improve applicability in routine clinical practice, several simplified prognostic models have subsequently been developed. The BODEx index replaces exercise capacity with exacerbation frequency, recognizing the major prognostic impact of recurrent exacerbations. Similarly, the ADO index combines age, dyspnea, and airflow obstruction into a practical mortality prediction model, whereas the DOSE index incorporates dyspnea, airflow obstruction, smoking status, and exacerbation frequency to evaluate both disease severity and future healthcare utilization. These multidimensional tools emphasize that prognosis in COPD depends on multiple interacting clinical variables rather than spirometric impairment alone.[56–58]

More recently, prognostic scores specifically designed for hospitalized patients with acute exacerbations have gained increasing clinical importance. The DECAF score, which incorporates dyspnea, eosinopenia, consolidation, acidemia, and atrial fibrillation, has consistently demonstrated excellent performance in predicting in-hospital mortality among patients admitted with acute exacerbations of COPD. Likewise, the BAP-65 score, based on blood urea nitrogen, altered mental status, pulse rate, and age, provides a simple bedside tool for identifying patients at increased risk of respiratory failure, need for mechanical ventilation, prolonged hospitalization, and mortality. In patients with concomitant pneumonia, the CURB-65 score also provides valuable prognostic information and may complement COPD-specific scoring systems in selected clinical settings.[59-60]

Frailty has recently emerged as an independent predictor of adverse outcomes in COPD. Frail patients exhibit reduced physiological reserve, impaired mobility, sarcopenia, malnutrition, cognitive decline, and diminished resilience to acute illness, resulting in increased hospitalization and mortality. Similarly, reduced daily physical activity and impaired health-related quality of life have consistently been associated with poor survival independent of pulmonary function. These observations reinforce the importance of evaluating functional status in addition to conventional physiological measurements.[61]

Advances in artificial intelligence and machine learning are expected to further enhance mortality prediction by integrating demographic characteristics, pulmonary function tests, laboratory biomarkers, imaging findings, exacerbation history, and comorbidities into comprehensive predictive models. Although these technologies remain under active investigation, they represent a promising step toward precision medicine and individualized risk stratification in COPD.[62]

Overall, multidimensional prognostic assessment provides a more accurate estimation of mortality risk than isolated clinical variables. Combining validated prognostic indices with clinical judgment, laboratory findings, radiological features, and patient-specific characteristics allows earlier identification of high-risk individuals and supports more personalized therapeutic strategies aimed at improving clinical outcomes.

Therapeutic Implications and Strategies to Reduce Mortality in COPD

Recognition of mortality predictors in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) has important therapeutic implications because it enables early identification of high-risk patients and facilitates individualized management strategies. Mortality reduction requires a comprehensive approach targeting both pulmonary disease and systemic manifestations, with particular emphasis on preventing exacerbations, optimizing functional status, managing comorbidities, and improving long-term follow-up. Risk stratification based on clinical characteristics, laboratory biomarkers, imaging findings, and validated prognostic indices should therefore be integrated into routine clinical practice.[63]

Smoking cessation remains the single most effective intervention for reducing disease progression and

improving long-term survival. Continued tobacco exposure accelerates airflow limitation, systemic inflammation, oxidative stress, and cardiovascular complications. Combining behavioral counseling with pharmacological therapy, including nicotine replacement therapy, varenicline, or bupropion, substantially increases smoking cessation success and should be strongly encouraged in all patients regardless of disease severity.[64]

Optimized pharmacological therapy plays a central role in reducing exacerbations and improving survival. Long-acting bronchodilators remain the cornerstone of treatment, while inhaled corticosteroids should be reserved for appropriately selected patients, particularly those with frequent exacerbations and eosinophilic inflammation. Triple inhaled therapy has demonstrated additional benefits in reducing exacerbation frequency and mortality among selected high-risk patients, highlighting the importance of phenotype-directed treatment strategies rather than a uniform therapeutic approach for all patients.[65,66]

Because recurrent exacerbations and hospitalization are among the strongest predictors of mortality, preventing future exacerbations should remain a primary therapeutic objective. Early recognition of clinical deterioration, prompt treatment of respiratory infections, optimization of inhaled therapy, vaccination, smoking cessation, pulmonary rehabilitation, and structured post-discharge follow-up have all been shown to reduce readmissions and improve long-term outcomes.

Vaccination represents an essential component of COPD management because respiratory infections are among the leading triggers of acute exacerbations and hospitalization. Annual influenza vaccination and pneumococcal vaccination have consistently been associated with reduced exacerbation frequency, hospitalization, and mortality, particularly in older adults and patients with advanced disease. More recently, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) vaccination has emerged as an additional preventive strategy for eligible older adults at increased risk of severe respiratory infection. Appropriate immunization should therefore be incorporated into comprehensive long-term management plans to reduce infection-related morbidity and improve survival. [67]

Pulmonary rehabilitation represents one of the most effective non-pharmacological interventions for improving exercise capacity, dyspnea, skeletal muscle performance, and quality of life. Nutritional assessment and individualized exercise training are particularly important in patients with low body mass index, frailty, sarcopenia, or impaired functional capacity, all of which are independently associated with increased mortality. Participation in pulmonary rehabilitation following hospitalization for acute exacerbation has been shown to reduce readmission rates, improve exercise capacity and quality of life, and may contribute to improved long-term survival. [68] Early enrollment following hospital discharge appears to maximize functional recovery, reduce physical deconditioning, improve treatment adherence, and enhance long-term patient self-management through multidisciplinary rehabilitation programs.

Long-term oxygen therapy remains the only intervention consistently shown to improve survival in patients with severe chronic hypoxemia. Likewise, long-term non-invasive ventilation may improve outcomes in carefully selected patients with persistent chronic hypercapnic respiratory failure following acute exacerbations. Appropriate patient selection is essential to maximize clinical benefit while avoiding unnecessary interventions in lower-risk populations.[69]

Management of comorbidities is equally important for reducing mortality. Cardiovascular diseases, diabetes mellitus, chronic kidney disease, pulmonary hypertension, osteoporosis, anxiety, depression, and lung cancer substantially influence prognosis and should be actively screened for and treated. A multidisciplinary approach involving pulmonologists, cardiologists, rehabilitation specialists, nutritionists, physiotherapists, and primary care physicians is therefore essential for comprehensive COPD management.[70–72]

Therapeutic strategies should be guided by individualized mortality risk assessment rather than spirometric severity alone. Integrating validated prognostic scores with clinical judgment allows clinicians to identify patients who require closer monitoring, earlier intervention, and more intensive management. Such an approach is likely to improve survival, reduce hospitalizations, and enhance

quality of life while supporting the transition toward precision medicine in COPD care.

Comprehensive patient education should also be considered an essential component of COPD management. Regular assessment of inhaler technique, adherence to prescribed medications, recognition of early exacerbation symptoms, and individualized self-management plans may improve treatment effectiveness, reduce preventable hospitalizations, and enhance long-term clinical outcomes. These interventions complement pharmacological therapy and should be incorporated into routine follow-up for high-risk patients.

Conclusion

Mortality in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is determined by a complex interplay of respiratory, systemic, functional, laboratory, radiological, and comorbidity-related factors rather than airflow limitation alone. Although spirometric impairment remains an important indicator of disease severity, accurate prediction of mortality requires a multidimensional assessment that incorporates exacerbation history, hospitalization, gas exchange abnormalities, nutritional status, inflammatory biomarkers, imaging findings, and validated prognostic indices.

Acute exacerbations, particularly those requiring hospitalization, intensive care admission, or ventilatory support, represent pivotal events associated with poor clinical outcomes and increased mortality. Likewise, systemic inflammation, cardiovascular disease, pulmonary hypertension, frailty, malnutrition, and other extrapulmonary manifestations substantially influence prognosis and should be routinely considered during clinical evaluation. Emerging biomarkers and advanced imaging techniques further enhance the identification of high-risk patients and complement traditional physiological measurements.

Validated multidimensional prognostic tools, including the BODE, DECAF, BAP-65, and CURB-65 scores in appropriate clinical settings, provide more accurate risk stratification than isolated clinical variables and facilitate individualized patient management. Integrating these scoring systems with comprehensive clinical assessment enables earlier recognition of patients at increased risk of adverse outcomes and supports timely implementation of targeted therapeutic interventions.

Future studies should validate integrated multidimensional prediction models across diverse COPD populations to improve individualized risk assessment and clinical outcomes.

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