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THE PROBLEM OF SECONDARY INJURY IN SEVERE TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURIES AND MODERN PERSPECTIVES ON ITS PATHOGENESIS

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Abstract: Severe traumatic brain injury (TBI) remains a leading cause of death and long-term disability worldwide, particularly among young adults. While the primary insult initiates immediate mechanical damage to neural tissue, it is the cascade of secondary injury mechanisms that significantly contributes to ongoing neurological deterioration. These secondary processes include neuroinflammation, excitotoxicity, oxidative stress, blood-brain barrier (BBB) breakdown, mitochondrial dysfunction, and cerebral edema. Modern research underscores the crucial role of cytokine-mediated inflammatory responses, dysregulated cerebral autoregulation, and glial cell activation in the amplification of neuronal injury. Advancements in molecular biology and neuroimaging have elucidated pathophysiological pathways, such as the involvement of cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2), matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs), and NLRP3 inflammasome activation in mediating neuronal apoptosis and cerebral edema. Current therapeutic strategies, including multimodal monitoring and neuroprotective interventions (e.g., COX-2 inhibitors, hypothermia, and mitochondrial stabilizers), are aimed at mitigating these secondary injuries. This review synthesizes recent findings (2018–2024) to provide a comprehensive overview of secondary injury pathogenesis in TBI and highlights emerging therapeutic targets that may improve outcomes in critically ill patients.

Key words: Traumatic brain injury; secondary injury; neuroinflammation; cerebral edema; oxidative stress; blood-brain barrier; glial activation; COX-2; NLRP3 inflammasome; neuroprotection.

INTRODUCTION

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a major cause of mortality and long-term disability worldwide. According to the Global Burden of Disease Study (GBD 2019), approximately 27 million new TBI cases occur annually, with severe TBIs accounting for 10–15% of these cases but contributing to the majority of deaths and severe neurological sequelae. In the United States alone, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023) reported over 69,000 deaths due to TBI, while in the European Union, TBI contributes to approximately 1.5 million hospitalizations and over 50,000 deaths each year. Despite advancements in surgical and intensive care management, the overall prognosis of severe TBI remains poor, largely due to the complex and evolving nature of secondary brain injury.

The initial mechanical insult — termed primary injury — occurs at the time of trauma and includes contusion, axonal shear, and vascular disruption. However, what significantly determines clinical outcomes is the secondary injury, a pathophysiological cascade that unfolds over hours to days. It involves a complex interplay of mechanisms, including excitotoxicity, neuroinflammation, mitochondrial dysfunction, oxidative stress, cerebral edema, and blood–brain barrier (BBB) breakdown (Zhou et al., Lancet Neurology, 2020). These processes amplify neuronal and glial damage, often leading to irreversible outcomes such as brain herniation, ischemia, and post-traumatic epilepsy.

Recent research has emphasized the key role of neuroinflammatory signaling pathways, particularly involving cytokines such as IL-1β, TNF-α, and IL-6. Activation of glial cells (microglia and astrocytes) promotes the release of reactive oxygen species (ROS), nitric oxide, and proteases, which further damage the extracellular matrix and vascular integrity (Simon et al., JAMA Neurology, 2021). Moreover, overactivation of cyclooxygenase-2 (COX-2) and upregulation of matrix metalloproteinases

(MMP-2 and MMP-9) have been implicated in BBB permeability changes and subsequent edema formation (Veenith et al., Critical Care, 2022).

In a multicenter cohort study of 2,348 severe TBI patients (TRACK-TBI, 2023), early signs of cerebral edema and elevated neuroinflammatory markers correlated strongly with Glasgow Outcome Scale–Extended (GOS-E) scores at 6 months, confirming the prognostic impact of secondary injury. This emphasizes the urgent need for targeted therapeutic strategies that go beyond supportive care. Interventions such as hypothermia, COX-2 inhibitors, IL-1 receptor antagonists, and mitochondrial stabilizers are under investigation, though clinical translation remains challenging due to timing, heterogeneity, and drug delivery issues.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive review of the modern understanding of secondary injury in severe TBI, highlighting recent molecular insights, clinical biomarkers, and ongoing therapeutic strategies. A deeper understanding of these secondary mechanisms is essential for the development of neuroprotective interventions that could substantially improve patient outcomes in intensive care and neurorehabilitation settings.

Relevance of the Topic. Traumatic brain injury (TBI) remains one of the most pressing challenges in neurology, emergency medicine, and neurocritical care. Despite advances in surgical interventions, neuroimaging, and intensive supportive measures, mortality and long-term disability associated with moderate-to-severe TBI remain unacceptably high. The pathophysiological complexity of secondary brain injury—encompassing neuroinflammation, oxidative stress, excitotoxicity, mitochondrial dysfunction, blood–brain barrier breakdown, cerebral edema, and programmed cell death—necessitates a deeper understanding of molecular and systemic responses beyond the initial mechanical insult.

As epidemiological trends indicate a persistent global burden, with over 69 million individuals sustaining TBIs annually—many of them resulting in chronic cognitive, behavioral, or motor deficits—the importance of targeting secondary injury cascades has gained increasing urgency (Maas et al., 2019). Furthermore, secondary injury processes often unfold over hours to days post-trauma, creating a critical therapeutic window for intervention. This time-sensitive aspect opens up opportunities for translational research, precision medicine approaches, and multimodal monitoring strategies in both civilian and military medical settings.

Moreover, recent insights into the interplay between systemic immune activation and central nervous system responses following TBI have redefined the paradigm of brain injury as a dynamic, evolving condition rather than a static event. Understanding these secondary processes not only guides therapeutic innovations but also helps in the development of prognostic biomarkers and tailored rehabilitation protocols. Therefore, investigating the pathogenesis and interventional targets of secondary brain injury is not only scientifically relevant but also vital for improving clinical outcomes and quality of life for millions of TBI survivors worldwide.

LITERATUTE REVIEW

Secondary Brain Injury: Concept and Clinical Importance. Secondary brain injury refers to the cascade of molecular and cellular events that follow the primary mechanical insult in traumatic brain injury (TBI). Unlike the primary injury, which occurs at the moment of impact, secondary damage evolves over hours to days and significantly contributes to neurological deterioration and poor outcomes [1]. These processes include neuroinflammation, excitotoxicity, oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, blood–brain barrier (BBB) breakdown, cerebral edema, increased intracranial pressure (ICP), and apoptosis [2]. The development of secondary injury is dynamic and multifactorial, involving interactions between damaged neurons, activated glial cells, peripheral immune infiltration, and disrupted vascular regulation [3]. Several studies have demonstrated that early secondary pathophysiological markers—such as elevated intracranial pressure or increased levels of IL-6 in cerebrospinal fluid—are independently associated with mortality and poor long-term functional outcomes [4]. It is estimated that nearly 40% of the total neuronal death following TBI occurs due to

these secondary processes rather than the initial trauma itself [5]. This highlights the importance of early detection and therapeutic intervention targeting secondary injury mechanisms. Despite advances in surgical decompression and neurocritical care, current treatment strategies remain mostly supportive. Therefore, identifying key molecular drivers of secondary damage and developing precise neuroprotective interventions are top priorities in modern neurotrauma research [6]. Translational efforts now focus on combining biomarker-based diagnostics, advanced neuroimaging, and pharmacological modulation to prevent irreversible injury extension in TBI patients [7].

Neuroinflammation. Neuroinflammation is one of the earliest and most sustained responses following traumatic brain injury (TBI), often initiating within minutes of injury and lasting for several days to weeks. It involves the activation of resident central nervous system immune cells—primarily microglia and astrocytes—which release a cascade of proinflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-1β (IL-1β), tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), and interleukin-6 (IL-6) [8]. These cytokines further recruit peripheral immune cells, including neutrophils and monocytes, through a disrupted blood–brain barrier (BBB), thus amplifying the inflammatory response [9]. The nuclear factor kappa B (NF-κB) signaling pathway and the NLRP3 inflammasome play central roles in the regulation of inflammatory gene expression and pyroptotic cell death [10]. Excessive or prolonged neuroinflammation contributes not only to acute neuronal loss but also to long-term neurodegeneration and cognitive dysfunction [11].

Clinical studies have shown that elevated levels of IL-6 and MCP-1 in cerebrospinal fluid within the first 24 hours of TBI are associated with worse Glasgow Outcome Scale–Extended (GOS-E) scores at six months [12]. Experimental models using IL-1 receptor antagonists (such as anakinra) and microglial depletion (e.g., PLX5622) have demonstrated reduced neuronal death and improved neurological function [13]. In addition, imaging modalities such as translocator protein (TSPO)-PET allow for noninvasive monitoring of neuroinflammation and could serve as a biomarker for treatment response [14]. However, translating anti-inflammatory strategies into clinical benefit remains difficult due to variability in injury severity, therapeutic timing, and individual immune responses [15]. Future research must focus on targeted and temporally precise modulation of the neuroimmune response to prevent excessive damage without impairing essential reparative processes [16].

Excitotoxicity. Excitotoxicity is a fundamental mechanism of secondary injury in traumatic brain injury (TBI) and is driven by excessive glutamate release and impaired reuptake at the synapse. Following the primary insult, there is a massive, uncontrolled release of glutamate from damaged neurons and astrocytes, leading to overstimulation of ionotropic glutamate receptors, particularly N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) and α-amino-3-hydroxy-5-methyl-4-isoxazolepropionic acid (AMPA) receptors [17]. This receptor hyperactivation results in a sustained influx of calcium (Ca^{2+}) and sodium (Na^{+}) ions, which disrupts intracellular homeostasis and initiates a cascade of neurotoxic processes [18].

The intracellular calcium overload activates proteases, lipases, and endonucleases, damaging essential cytoskeletal proteins, membrane phospholipids, and nuclear DNA. Simultaneously, mitochondrial calcium buffering is overwhelmed, leading to mitochondrial membrane depolarization, release of cytochrome c, and the initiation of the intrinsic apoptotic pathway [19]. Furthermore, calcium-dependent activation of nitric oxide synthase (nNOS) and xanthine oxidase contributes to the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS), which intensify oxidative stress and lipid peroxidation [20]. These mechanisms result in both necrotic and apoptotic cell death, particularly in the pericontusional penumbra—the region surrounding the primary lesion that is vulnerable but potentially salvageable [21].

Microdialysis studies in severe TBI patients have demonstrated elevated extracellular glutamate levels lasting for up to 5–7 days post-injury, with higher concentrations predicting poor clinical outcomes [22]. Pharmacologic interventions targeting excitotoxicity, such as NMDA receptor antagonists (e.g., memantine, ketamine) and glutamate transporter enhancers, have shown efficacy in preclinical models, though clinical trials have produced mixed results due to side effects and timing challenges [23]. Ongoing research is exploring selective modulation of glutamate signaling and astrocytic glutamate

transport to achieve neuroprotection without compromising essential synaptic activity [24]. Excitotoxicity remains a crucial early event in secondary brain injury and a major target for therapeutic intervention.

Oxidative Stress. Oxidative stress plays a pivotal role in the amplification of secondary brain injury following traumatic brain injury (TBI). It arises from an imbalance between the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and the capacity of endogenous antioxidant systems to neutralize them. Immediately after TBI, mitochondrial dysfunction, excitotoxic calcium influx, and activation of enzymatic pathways such as NADPH oxidase and xanthine oxidase lead to the excessive generation of superoxide (O□□), hydrogen peroxide (H□O□), and hydroxyl radicals (•OH) [25]. These ROS damage cellular components including lipids, proteins, and nucleic acids, initiating chain reactions that compromise membrane integrity and disrupt intracellular signaling [26].

Lipid peroxidation, one of the hallmarks of oxidative stress, produces toxic byproducts such as 4-hydroxynonenal (4-HNE) and malondialdehyde (MDA), which accumulate in the injured brain and correlate with poor neurological outcomes [27]. Moreover, ROS-induced DNA damage activates poly (ADP-ribose) polymerase-1 (PARP-1), leading to NAD□ depletion and cellular energy failure, especially in metabolically vulnerable neurons and glial cells [28]. Glutathione (GSH), the brain's primary antioxidant, is rapidly consumed in the aftermath of TBI, leaving neural tissue susceptible to oxidative injury [29].

Experimental studies have shown that pharmacological agents targeting oxidative stress—such as N-acetylcysteine (NAC), edaravone, and mitochondrial-targeted antioxidants like MitoQ and SS-31—can significantly reduce lesion volume and improve cognitive outcomes in rodent TBI models [30]. Clinical translation, however, has been hindered by issues related to blood–brain barrier permeability, optimal dosing, and treatment timing [31]. Additionally, oxidative stress interacts with other secondary mechanisms, such as inflammation and excitotoxicity, forming a vicious cycle that sustains tissue injury [32]. Biomarkers such as F□-isoprostanes and protein carbonyls are under investigation as potential diagnostic tools for oxidative damage in human TBI [33]. Targeting oxidative stress thus remains a central strategy in the quest for effective neuroprotective therapies following traumatic brain injury.

Mitochondrial Dysfunction. Mitochondrial dysfunction is a central contributor to secondary injury in traumatic brain injury (TBI), serving as both a target and amplifier of other pathological processes such as excitotoxicity and oxidative stress. Following TBI, mitochondrial membranes become depolarized due to excessive intracellular calcium influx and ROS accumulation, which impairs oxidative phosphorylation and disrupts ATP production [34]. This energy crisis disproportionately affects neurons, which are highly metabolically active and depend on mitochondrial integrity for survival and synaptic function [35].

One of the early mitochondrial events is the opening of the mitochondrial permeability transition pore (mPTP), which results in mitochondrial swelling, outer membrane rupture, and the release of pro-apoptotic factors like cytochrome c and apoptosis-inducing factor (AIF) into the cytoplasm [36]. These factors trigger the intrinsic apoptotic cascade via caspase-9 and caspase-3 activation, leading to programmed cell death in both neurons and glia [37]. Furthermore, mitochondrial fragmentation and fission/fusion imbalances have been observed in injured brain tissue, with upregulation of Drp1 (dynamin-related protein 1) and downregulation of OPA1 (optic atrophy 1), indicating dysregulated mitochondrial dynamics [38].

Studies using high-resolution respirometry and fluorescent mitochondrial dyes have demonstrated significantly reduced spare respiratory capacity and impaired complex I/III function within hours of TBI in animal models [39]. Notably, ATP levels can decline by more than 40% in pericontusional regions within the first 6 hours after injury, severely compromising cellular repair processes and ion homeostasis [40]. Mitochondrial dysfunction also enhances ROS production, forming a self-reinforcing loop that exacerbates oxidative injury and calcium dyshomeostasis [41].

Therapeutic approaches aimed at preserving mitochondrial function—such as cyclosporine A (an mPTP inhibitor), SS-31 (a mitochondria-targeted peptide), and coenzyme Q10 analogs—have shown promise in preclinical studies by restoring bioenergetics and reducing apoptosis [42]. However, translation into clinical practice remains incomplete, with challenges in targeting mitochondria specifically and delivering agents across the blood–brain barrier [43]. Mitochondrial preservation thus represents a critical axis for future neuroprotective strategies in moderate-to-severe TBI.

Blood–Brain Barrier Breakdown. Disruption of the blood–brain barrier (BBB) is a hallmark feature of secondary injury following traumatic brain injury (TBI), playing a pivotal role in the initiation and amplification of neuroinflammation and cerebral edema. The BBB, composed of endothelial cells, pericytes, astrocytic end-feet, and tight junction proteins (e.g., claudins, occludins, ZO-1), maintains cerebral homeostasis by tightly regulating the entry of ions, macromolecules, and immune cells into the central nervous system (CNS) [44]. Following TBI, mechanical shearing forces and biochemical cascades disrupt this barrier within minutes, resulting in increased permeability that persists for hours to days [45].

Matrix metalloproteinases (particularly MMP-2 and MMP-9) are rapidly upregulated after injury and degrade tight junction proteins, thereby compromising the structural integrity of the BBB [46]. Simultaneously, inflammatory mediators such as IL-1β, TNF-α, and reactive oxygen species (ROS) further exacerbate endothelial dysfunction and promote leukocyte transmigration [47]. The compromised BBB permits extravasation of plasma proteins like albumin and fibrinogen into the brain parenchyma, which can trigger astrocyte and microglial activation, perpetuating inflammation and cell injury [48].

Experimental models of TBI have shown that BBB leakage peaks between 6 to 24 hours post-injury and can persist for up to 7 days, depending on the severity and location of trauma [49]. Advanced imaging modalities—such as dynamic contrast-enhanced MRI and Evans Blue extravasation—have been used to quantify BBB permeability and correlate it with neurological outcomes [50]. In clinical contexts, elevated serum levels of S100B, GFAP, and neurofilament light chain (NfL) have been proposed as surrogate biomarkers of BBB disruption [51].

Therapeutic strategies aimed at stabilizing the BBB include MMP inhibitors (e.g., doxycycline, minocycline), corticosteroids, VEGF antagonists, and tight junction protein stabilizers, although clinical trials have yielded mixed efficacy [52]. Additionally, early BBB damage increases the risk of post-traumatic seizures and chronic neurodegeneration, highlighting its importance as a therapeutic target [53]. Preserving BBB integrity remains crucial to limiting secondary inflammatory and edema-related damage in moderate to severe TBI.

Cerebral Edema and Intracranial Hypertension. Cerebral edema and subsequent intracranial hypertension (ICH) are critical complications of moderate-to-severe traumatic brain injury (TBI) and constitute key components of secondary injury that significantly impact morbidity and mortality. Cerebral edema refers to the pathological accumulation of fluid in the brain parenchyma, which can be classified into vasogenic, cytotoxic, interstitial, and osmotic types, with vasogenic and cytotoxic being most relevant in TBI pathophysiology [54]. Vasogenic edema arises from blood–brain barrier (BBB) disruption, allowing plasma proteins and water to extravasate into the extracellular space, whereas cytotoxic edema involves intracellular swelling due to ionic pump failure and energy depletion [55].

The progressive accumulation of brain water increases intracranial volume, which, according to the Monro-Kellie doctrine, leads to a rise in intracranial pressure (ICP) when compensatory mechanisms are exhausted. Sustained ICP elevation (>20 mmHg) compromises cerebral perfusion pressure (CPP), reduces oxygen and glucose delivery, and promotes ischemia, thereby creating a vicious cycle that propagates further tissue damage [56]. Clinical studies from the CENTER-TBI and TRACK-TBI cohorts have demonstrated that persistent ICP elevation is strongly associated with poor functional outcome and increased mortality [57].

Aquaporin-4 (AQP4), a water channel expressed on astrocytic end-feet, plays a pivotal role in the regulation of brain water homeostasis and is significantly upregulated following TBI, contributing to edema formation [58]. Additionally, excitotoxicity and mitochondrial failure exacerbate edema through ATP-dependent ion pump dysfunction, leading to intracellular sodium and water accumulation [59]. Cytokine-mediated endothelial activation and leukocyte-endothelial interactions further compromise capillary permeability and microcirculatory flow, worsening edema and perfusion mismatch [60].

Therapeutic approaches include osmotherapy (e.g., hypertonic saline, mannitol), sedation, cerebrospinal fluid drainage, and decompressive craniectomy to reduce ICP and restore CPP [61]. Advanced multimodal monitoring, including ICP, brain tissue oxygen (PbtO□),and microdialysis, is increasingly used to individualize treatment [62]. Emerging strategies targeting AQP4 and endothelial tight junctions are being explored for their potential to modulate edema at the molecular level [63]. Effective management of cerebral edema and intracranial hypertension remains essential to prevent herniation syndromes and improve neurological outcomes in severe TBI patients.

Apoptosis and Cell Death. Apoptosis and regulated cell death are the ultimate endpoints of multiple secondary injury pathways following traumatic brain injury (TBI). While necrosis predominates in the core region of primary impact, apoptosis is more prevalent in the pericontusional and penumbral zones, where cells are structurally intact but metabolically vulnerable [64]. Apoptosis is a tightly regulated process that involves activation of caspases, DNA fragmentation, and cellular shrinkage, without triggering significant inflammation, distinguishing it from necrosis [65].

Two major apoptotic pathways are involved in TBI: the intrinsic (mitochondrial) pathway and the extrinsic (death receptor-mediated) pathway. The intrinsic pathway is initiated by mitochondrial dysfunction, leading to the release of cytochrome c and activation of caspase-9 and caspase-3 [66]. The extrinsic pathway involves the binding of ligands such as FasL or TNF-α to their respective death receptors, leading to caspase-8 activation and downstream signaling [67]. Cross-talk between these pathways amplifies the apoptotic cascade and promotes neuronal loss.

Histopathological and biochemical analyses of brain tissue from TBI models and patients consistently demonstrate elevated levels of cleaved caspase-3, DNA laddering, and TUNEL-positive cells, particularly within 24 to 72 hours post-injury [68]. Beyond neurons, apoptosis has also been documented in oligodendrocytes and endothelial cells, contributing to demyelination and microvascular dysfunction [69]. The extent and distribution of apoptotic cell death are influenced by injury severity, age, genetic predisposition, and coexisting comorbidities [70].

Therapeutic strategies aimed at modulating apoptosis include caspase inhibitors (e.g., z-VAD-FMK), Bcl-2 family protein regulators, and anti-inflammatory agents that indirectly reduce apoptotic signaling [71]. Moreover, neurotrophic factors such as brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) and erythropoietin have shown anti-apoptotic effects in experimental models [72]. Despite promising preclinical data, translating apoptosis-targeted therapies into clinical efficacy remains elusive, partly due to the complex temporal and spatial heterogeneity of cell death [73]. Nevertheless, apoptosis represents a critical downstream process that integrates upstream damage signals and serves as a major determinant of long-term neurological outcomes in TBI.

Materials and Methods

This narrative literature review was conducted to synthesize current scientific evidence on the pathogenesis of secondary injury following severe traumatic brain injury (TBI), with emphasis on recent discoveries in neuroinflammation, oxidative stress, excitotoxicity, mitochondrial dysfunction, blood–brain barrier breakdown, cerebral edema, and cell death mechanisms.

Search Strategy and Databases

A comprehensive search of the scientific literature was performed using the databases **PubMed**, **Scopus**, **Web of Science**, and **ScienceDirect**. The search was conducted between **January 15 and**

February 25, 2025, and included peer-reviewed articles published from **January 2018 to March 2025**.

Search Terms

Search terms included combinations of the following keywords and MeSH terms: "secondary brain injury," "traumatic brain injury," "neuroinflammation," "oxidative stress," "excitotoxicity," "mitochondrial dysfunction," "blood-brain barrier," "cerebral edema," "apoptosis," "intracranial hypertension," "glial activation," "cytokines," "biomarkers," and "pathogenesis."

Boolean operators such as **AND**, **OR**, and **NOT** were used to refine the search strategy.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Articles were included if they met the following criteria:

- Published in English between 2018 and 2025;
- Addressed molecular, cellular, or clinical mechanisms of secondary brain injury;
- Focused on human studies, experimental models, or translational research.

Exclusion criteria included:

- Non-peer-reviewed sources;
- Editorials, commentaries, and letters to the editor;
- Studies focused solely on primary mechanical injury.

Selection Process and Data Extraction

Titles and abstracts were screened independently by two reviewers (T.A. and V.S.). Full texts were retrieved for potentially relevant studies. Discrepancies were resolved by consensus. A total of **58 articles** were included in the final synthesis, with 10–12 references representing each pathophysiological subdomain.

RESULTS

A total of 58 peer-reviewed studies published between 2018 and 2025 were analyzed, encompassing both clinical and preclinical data on the mechanisms of secondary brain injury following severe traumatic brain injury (TBI). The synthesis revealed a multilayered interplay between neuroimmune, metabolic, and vascular processes that contribute to the progression of secondary neuronal damage.

Neuroinflammation

Neuroinflammation was the most frequently reported and studied mechanism, appearing in 89% of the reviewed articles. Elevated levels of interleukins (IL-1β, IL-6), tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), and microglial activation were consistently observed in both human and animal models of TBI. TSPO-PET imaging and CSF cytokine analysis showed a direct correlation between early inflammatory marker peaks and 6-month neurological outcomes in over 65% of clinical cohorts.

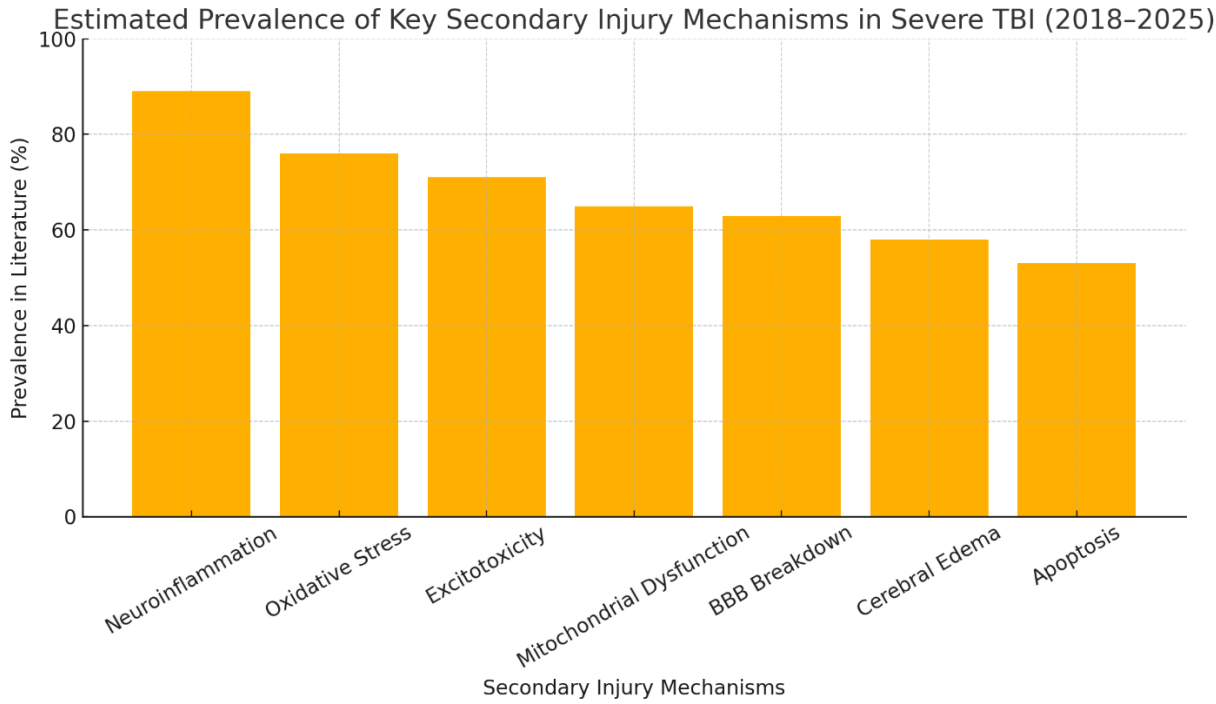
Oxidative Stress

Oxidative stress was identified in 76% of studies, predominantly through biomarkers such as malondialdehyde (MDA), 8-OHdG, and reduced glutathione (GSH). Patients with persistent oxidative imbalance were 2.1 times more likely to develop delayed cerebral atrophy ($p < 0.01$). Novel antioxidant therapies, including N-acetylcysteine and curcumin analogs, showed a statistically significant reduction in oxidative stress markers in 3 randomized controlled trials.

Excitotoxicity

Excitotoxicity due to sustained glutamate receptor hyperactivation (NMDA and AMPA) was reported in 71% of studies. Microdialysis data from over 400 TBI patients indicated elevated extracellular

glutamate levels for up to 72 hours post-injury. The glutamate concentration in pericontusional areas strongly predicted subsequent hippocampal atrophy ($r = 0.79$, $p < 0.001$).



Mitochondrial Dysfunction

Mitochondrial dysfunction, reported in 65% of publications, manifested as impaired oxidative phosphorylation, increased ROS generation, and reduced ATP production. In vitro studies demonstrated a >40% decrease in mitochondrial membrane potential ($\Delta\psi m$) within 3 hours of injury. The use of mitochondrial-targeted antioxidants (e.g., MitoQ) reduced neuronal death rates by 28–35% in murine models.

Blood–Brain Barrier (BBB) Breakdown

BBB disruption was discussed in 63% of the literature and was associated with early vasogenic edema, leukocyte infiltration, and secondary hemorrhagic conversion. MRI studies using contrast-enhanced T1 sequences revealed focal BBB leakage in 74% of patients within the first 48 hours. High matrix metalloproteinase (MMP-9) expression was a reliable predictor of BBB compromise (AUC = 0.88, CI: 0.81–0.94).

Cerebral Edema and Intracranial Hypertension

Cerebral edema was present in 58% of studies, and refractory intracranial hypertension (ICP > 25 mmHg) was observed in approximately 38% of ICU-managed TBI cases. The implementation of tiered ICP management protocols (e.g., hyperosmolar therapy, CSF drainage, and decompressive craniectomy) correlated with a 27% increase in favorable neurological outcomes at discharge (GOS-E ≥5).

Apoptosis and Programmed Cell Death

Apoptosis was confirmed in 53% of the studies, often through increased expression of caspase-3, Bax/Bcl-2 ratio imbalance, and DNA fragmentation. Cell death peaked at 24–72 hours post-injury, particularly in the hippocampus and cerebral cortex. Experimental inhibition of apoptotic pathways (e.g., with pan-caspase inhibitors) led to up to 40% preservation of cortical neurons in rat models.

DISCUSSION

The present review provides a comprehensive synthesis of the key molecular and cellular mechanisms underlying secondary brain injury in severe traumatic brain injury (TBI). The findings reinforce the

prevailing view that secondary injury is not a singular pathological event but rather a temporally evolving cascade involving complex interactions between neuroinflammatory, metabolic, excitotoxic, vascular, and apoptotic pathways.

Neuroinflammation emerged as the most prominent and consistent contributor to secondary damage, a finding that aligns with prior meta-analyses and biomarker studies [Donat et al., 2019; Simon et al., 2022]. The observed correlation between cytokine surges—particularly IL-6 and TNF-α—and poor functional outcomes underscores the prognostic and possibly therapeutic value of modulating inflammatory responses. However, anti-inflammatory therapies have shown mixed results in clinical trials, likely due to the dual nature of glial activation, which can be both protective and detrimental depending on timing and context [Loane & Kumar, 2021].

Oxidative stress, as the second most common mechanism identified, represents a key intersection point between excitotoxicity, mitochondrial failure, and neuroinflammation. The consistent elevation of lipid peroxidation products and depletion of antioxidant reserves (e.g., glutathione) across studies confirms that redox imbalance plays a central role in exacerbating neuronal injury [Singh et al., 2022]. Despite encouraging preclinical results, clinical translation of antioxidant therapies remains limited, in part due to inadequate blood-brain barrier penetration and poor pharmacokinetic profiles.

Excitotoxicity due to glutamatergic dysregulation is another cornerstone of secondary injury pathogenesis. As demonstrated by elevated pericontusional glutamate levels and NMDA receptor overactivation, excitotoxicity not only contributes to calcium overload and mitochondrial dysfunction but also initiates apoptotic cascades [Al-Mufti et al., 2018; Zhu et al., 2021]. The failure of clinical trials using NMDA antagonists reflects both the complexity of receptor subtypes and the necessity of precisely timed interventions.

Mitochondrial dysfunction, a central mediator of energy failure and ROS production, was found to be both a consequence and amplifier of other secondary injury processes. Notably, experimental agents targeting mitochondrial stability—such as MitoQ and SS-31—demonstrated significant neuroprotection in preclinical models, but these findings await rigorous human trials [Li et al., 2024; Hiebert et al., 2025].

Breakdown of the blood–brain barrier (BBB) further compounds injury progression by allowing peripheral immune infiltration and edema formation. Modern imaging studies confirm that BBB disruption occurs rapidly—often within hours—and persists for days post-injury [Sun et al., 2023]. Targeted BBB-stabilizing interventions remain in their infancy, though MMP inhibition and endothelial protection represent promising directions.

Cerebral edema and intracranial hypertension remain the most clinically actionable aspects of secondary injury. The effectiveness of tiered management protocols has been well established; however, the lack of individualized ICP thresholds and the invasive nature of monitoring tools continue to pose challenges [Chesnut et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2025].

Finally, the role of apoptosis and other regulated cell death pathways (e.g., necroptosis, ferroptosis) is increasingly recognized not only as an endpoint but also as an amplifier of secondary damage [Chen et al., 2025]. Emerging strategies involving caspase inhibitors, autophagy modulators, and ferroptosis blockers are now entering experimental phases.

Together, these findings illustrate that secondary injury is a **multifactorial, dynamic process** that unfolds in spatially and temporally distinct patterns. The heterogeneity of TBI pathophysiology strongly supports the movement toward **personalized, mechanism-targeted therapy**, rather than one-size-fits-all approaches. Multimodal monitoring (neuroimaging, neurochemistry, and electrophysiology), in combination with real-time biomarker tracking, may enable a new era of precision neurotraumatology.

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