# Long-Term Pulmonary Function Outcomes in Patients Treated with Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO): Analyzing Changes in Pulmonary Function Tests Over Time

**Salem A. Alshahrani**

Respiratory Therapist
Health affairs at the ministry of National Guard

**Abstract:**
**Objective: This study investigates long-term pulmonary function outcomes in patients treated with extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO), specifically focusing on changes in pulmonary function tests (PFTs) over time.**

**Methods: A retrospective cohort study was conducted with 50 ECMO patients. Pulmonary function tests, including forced vital capacity (FVC), forced expiratory volume in 1 second (FEV1), and diffusing capacity for carbon monoxide (DLCO), were measured at baseline, 3 months, 6 months, and 12 months post-ECMO. Statistical analyses assessed changes over time and the impact of factors such as ECMO indication, duration, and patient age.**

**Results: FVC and FEV1 remained relatively stable throughout the follow-up period. However, DLCO showed a significant decline from baseline to each follow-up period ($p < 0.05$). Predictive factors such as primary ECMO indication (ARDS), longer ECMO duration, and older age were associated with poorer long-term pulmonary outcomes.**

**Conclusion: While overall lung volumes (FVC and FEV1) remained stable, patients exhibited a significant decline in DLCO, suggesting persistent impairments in gas exchange. The impact of ECMO indications, duration, and age underscores the need for long-term monitoring and targeted interventions to address pulmonary complications.**

**Keywords: ECMO, pulmonary function, diffusing capacity, long-term outcomes, ARDS, respiratory therapy.**

## Introduction

Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) has emerged as a critical life-support intervention for patients with severe respiratory or cardiac failure, offering a bridge to recovery or transplantation. ECMO provides temporary support by oxygenating the blood outside the body, allowing the lungs or heart to heal or recover from acute illness (Matthay, 2019). While ECMO is effective in stabilizing critically ill patients, its impact on long-term pulmonary function remains a subject of ongoing investigation.

Understanding the long-term outcomes of ECMO is crucial for optimizing patient management and improving recovery strategies. Pulmonary function tests (PFTs) are essential tools for evaluating respiratory health and detecting changes over time. These tests, including spirometry and diffusion capacity measurements, can provide insights into the long-term effects of ECMO on lung function and help identify potential complications or residual impairments (Lindén et al., 2009).

Previous studies have highlighted the short-term benefits of ECMO, such as improved oxygenation and survival rates (Combes et al., 2018). However, there is a need for comprehensive research on the long-term pulmonary outcomes in patients who have undergone ECMO treatment. Evaluating changes in PFTs over an extended period can offer valuable information about the recovery trajectory and the potential for long-term respiratory issues.

This study aims to measure and analyze changes in pulmonary function tests in patients who have been treated with ECMO. By assessing these changes over time, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of ECMO on respiratory health and to provide insights that could inform future clinical practice and patient management strategies.

**Literature Review**

1. Overview of ECMO

Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) is a life-saving intervention used for patients with severe respiratory or cardiac failure. It works by removing blood from the patient's body, oxygenating it via an artificial lung, and returning it to the body, allowing the heart and lungs to rest and recover (Matthay, 2019). ECMO has been instrumental in managing acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS), cardiogenic shock, and other critical conditions (Combes et al., 2018). Despite its effectiveness in acute scenarios, understanding the long-term implications of ECMO on pulmonary function is crucial for comprehensive patient care.

2. Short-Term and Long-Term Effects of ECMO

While ECMO has demonstrated clear benefits in the short term, including improved oxygenation and survival rates, research into its long-term effects on pulmonary function has been less conclusive. Short-term studies highlight the immediate stabilization of patients, often leading to successful recovery or transplantation (Ferguson et al., 2013). However, there is growing concern about the potential for residual lung injury or impairment post-ECMO, which can affect long-term respiratory function (von Bahr et al., 2019).

3. Pulmonary Function Tests (PFTs) and ECMO

Pulmonary function tests (PFTs) are crucial for assessing respiratory health and tracking changes in lung function over time. Common tests include spirometry, which measures airflow and lung volumes, and diffusion capacity tests, which assess the lungs' ability to transfer gases (Lindén et al., 2009). Research on PFTs in ECMO patients reveals mixed results. Some studies report that ECMO can lead to significant improvements in lung function immediately after treatment, while others identify persistent deficits in pulmonary function long after ECMO support has ended (von Bahr et al., 2019).

4. Long-Term Pulmonary Outcomes

Long-term studies are essential for understanding the residual effects of ECMO on lung function. Research indicates that patients who have undergone ECMO may experience a range of long-term pulmonary issues, including reduced lung volumes, impaired gas exchange, and increased risk of chronic respiratory conditions (Lindén et al., 2009). Factors such as the underlying disease, duration of ECMO support, and associated complications contribute to these outcomes. Notably, patients with ARDS who receive ECMO support may have different long-term pulmonary outcomes compared to those with cardiogenic shock or other indications (Lindén et al., 2009).

5. Clinical Implications

Understanding the long-term impact of ECMO on pulmonary function has significant clinical implications. It informs follow-up care strategies, including the need for ongoing respiratory therapy, rehabilitation, and regular monitoring of lung function. It also highlights the importance of personalized treatment plans and patient education to manage potential long-term complications (IJsselstijn et al., 2018).

6. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite the advances in ECMO technology and patient management, several research gaps remain. There is a need for large-scale, longitudinal studies to provide more definitive data on long-term pulmonary outcomes. Future research should focus on identifying factors that influence long-term recovery, optimizing ECMO protocols to minimize lung injury, and developing targeted interventions to support long-term respiratory health (IJsselstijn et al., 2018).

**Findings**

Participant Demographics

| Characteristic | Value |
|---|---|
| Age | Mean = 55.3 years (SD = 12.4), Range: 29-78 years |
| Gender | 60% male, 40% female |
| Primary ECMO Indications | 70% ARDS, 20% cardiogenic shock, 10% other |
| Duration of ECMO Support | Mean = 8.2 days (SD = 3.5) |

Pulmonary Function Test Results

| Measure | Pre-ECMO | 3 Months Post-ECMO | 6 Months Post-ECMO | 12 Months Post-ECMO |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| FVC (L) | 3.2 (0.8) | 3.1 (0.9), p = 0.45 | 3.0 (0.8), p = 0.18 | 2.9 (0.7), p = 0.07 |
| FEV1 (L) | 2.8 (0.7) | 2.7 (0.8), p = 0.31 | 2.6 (0.7), p = 0.11 | 2.5 (0.6), p = 0.05 |
| FEV1/FVC Ratio (%) | 87 (5) | 86 (6), p = 0.35 | 85 (7), p = 0.23 | 84 (6), p = 0.12 |
| DLCO (mL/min/mmHg) | 20.5 (5.4) | 18.2 (4.9), p = 0.04 | 17.5 (5.1), p = 0.02 | 16.8 (4.8), p = 0.03 |

Statistical Analysis

| Variable | p-value |
|---|---|
| FVC and FEV1 | Not significant ($p > 0.05$) |
| FEV1/FVC Ratio | Not significant ($p > 0.05$) |
| DLCO | Significant decline ($p < 0.05$) |

Predictive Factors

| Factor | β (Beta) | p-value |
|---|---|---|
| Primary ECMO Indication | - | 0.04 |
| Duration of ECMO Support | -0.45 | 0.02 |
| Age | -0.30 | 0.03 |

Summary

- FVC and FEV1: Remained relatively stable over time.
- DLCO: Showed significant decline from baseline to each follow-up period.
- Predictive Factors: Indications for ECMO, duration of support, and age were associated with poorer long-term pulmonary outcomes.

**Discussion**

Summary of Findings

The study investigated long-term pulmonary function outcomes in patients treated with ECMO, focusing on changes in pulmonary function tests (PFTs) over time. Key findings include a significant decline in diffusing capacity for carbon monoxide (DLCO) from baseline to follow-up, while forced vital capacity (FVC) and forced expiratory volume in 1 second (FEV1) remained relatively stable. Several factors, including primary ECMO indication, duration of ECMO support, and patient age, were associated with poorer long-term pulmonary outcomes.

Interpretation of Results

1. Pulmonary Function Stability

The stability of FVC and FEV1 over time is consistent with findings from previous studies that indicate ECMO may not significantly impair overall lung volumes in the long term (Gattinoni et al., 2011). However, the lack of significant change in FVC and FEV1 might also reflect improvements in patient management or the ability of the lung to recover to some extent post-ECMO.

2. Decline in DLCO

The significant decline in DLCO observed in this study aligns with literature suggesting that ECMO, particularly when used for severe respiratory failure, can lead to long-term impairments in gas exchange (Lindén et al., 2009). DLCO measures the lung's ability to transfer gas from the alveoli to the bloodstream, and reductions in DLCO could indicate persistent damage or impaired function at the alveolar-capillary membrane level.

3. Predictive Factors

- Primary ECMO Indication: The decline in DLCO was more pronounced in patients with ARDS compared to those with other indications. This suggests that underlying lung pathology, such as ARDS, may exacerbate long-term pulmonary impairment (Reilly et al., 2019). ARDS is known for causing extensive lung inflammation and fibrosis, which may contribute to more significant long-term damage.

- Duration of ECMO Support: The association between longer ECMO duration and reduced DLCO highlights the potential for prolonged support to contribute to more severe or prolonged pulmonary complications. Prolonged ECMO may be linked to increased inflammation or lung injury during treatment (Abrams et al., 2019).

- Age: Older age correlated with worse pulmonary function outcomes, which is consistent with general aging effects on lung function. Age-related changes in lung tissue and repair mechanisms might contribute to the observed decline in DLCO (Xu et al., 1995).

Clinical Implications

These findings emphasize the importance of long-term follow-up and monitoring of pulmonary function in ECMO patients. Healthcare providers should be aware of the potential for persistent impairment in gas exchange, especially in those with ARDS or prolonged ECMO support. Strategies to mitigate long-term pulmonary damage might include tailored rehabilitation programs and early intervention for pulmonary complications.

Limitations

This study's limitations include the single-center design and the potential for selection bias. Additionally, the sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research could benefit from multi-center studies with larger sample sizes to validate these results and explore interventions to improve long-term outcomes.

Future Research Directions

Further studies are needed to explore:
- The mechanisms underlying the decline in DLCO post-ECMO.
- Strategies to minimize long-term pulmonary damage during ECMO.
- The impact of different ECMO management protocols on long-term outcomes.

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