LUMEN ET VIRTUS
ISSN: 2177-2789

NEUROLOGICAL AND OCULAR MANIFESTATIONS IN ACUTE METHANOL POISONING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF CLINICAL AND RADIOLOGICAL OUTCOMES

MANIFESTAÇÕES NEUROLÓGICAS E OCULARES NA INTOXICAÇÃO AGUDA POR METANOL: UMA REVISÃO SISTEMÁTICA DOS RESULTADOS CLÍNICOS E RADIOLÓGICOS

MANIFESTACIONES NEUROLÓGICAS Y OCULARES EN LA INTOXICACIÓN AGUDA POR METANOL: UNA REVISIÓN SISTEMÁTICA DE LOS RESULTADOS CLÍNICOS Y RADIOLÓGICOS

https://doi.org/10.56238/levv16n53-092

Submission date: 09/23/2025 **Publication date:** 10/23/2025

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Methanol poisoning is a rare but life-threatening toxicological emergency characterized by severe neurological and ocular sequelae resulting from the metabolism of methanol to formic acid, which induces mitochondrial dysfunction and tissue hypoxia.

Objective: To systematically review the neurological and ophthalmological manifestations of acute methanol intoxication, with emphasis on neuroimaging findings, mechanisms of injury, and clinical outcomes. Secondary objectives included evaluation of diagnostic markers, prognostic predictors, and therapeutic approaches related to visual and neurological recovery.

Methods: A comprehensive literature search was performed in PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, LILACS, ClinicalTrials.gov, and the World Health Organization International Clinical Trials Registry Platform (ICTRP). Studies published between January 2015 and March 2025 were included without language restriction. Eligible studies comprised clinical trials, observational studies, case series, and radiological analyses addressing neurological or ocular outcomes in human methanol poisoning.

Results and Discussion: A total of 41 studies met the inclusion criteria, including prospective and retrospective cohorts, radiological reviews, and case series. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) revealed characteristic bilateral putaminal necrosis and optic nerve

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hyperintensity, while optical coherence tomography (OCT) demonstrated irreversible loss of retinal nerve fiber layer. Clinically, visual loss and parkinsonian syndromes were the most common sequelae. Early diagnosis and combined therapy with fomepizole, ethanol, and hemodialysis were associated with better outcomes.

Conclusion: Methanol poisoning causes complex neurological and ocular damage through metabolic acidosis and formate-induced cellular hypoxia. Neuroimaging and ophthalmologic assessment are essential for prognosis and management. Multidisciplinary care integrating neurology, ophthalmology, and critical care remains vital for minimizing long-term morbidity.

Keywords: Methanol Poisoning. Optic Neuropathy. Magnetic Resonance Imaging. Basal Ganglia.

RESUMO

Introdução: A intoxicação por metanol é uma emergência toxicológica rara, mas potencialmente fatal, caracterizada por sequelas neurológicas e oculares graves, resultantes da metabolização do metanol em ácido fórmico, que induz disfunção mitocondrial e hipóxia tecidual.

Objetivo: Revisar sistematicamente as manifestações neurológicas e oftalmológicas da intoxicação aguda por metanol, com ênfase nos achados de neuroimagem, mecanismos de lesão e desfechos clínicos. Os objetivos secundários incluíram a avaliação de marcadores diagnósticos, preditores prognósticos e abordagens terapêuticas relacionadas à recuperação visual e neurológica.

Métodos: Foi realizada uma busca bibliográfica abrangente nas bases de dados PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Biblioteca Cochrane, LILACS, ClinicalTrials.gov e na Plataforma Internacional de Registro de Ensaios Clínicos (ICTRP) da Organização Mundial da Saúde. Estudos publicados entre janeiro de 2015 e março de 2025 foram incluídos, sem restrição de idioma. Os estudos elegíveis incluíram ensaios clínicos, estudos observacionais, séries de casos e análises radiológicas que abordassem desfechos neurológicos ou oculares na intoxicação humana por metanol.

Resultados e Discussão: Um total de 41 estudos preencheram os critérios de inclusão, incluindo coortes prospectivas e retrospectivas, revisões radiológicas e séries de casos. A ressonância magnética (RM) revelou necrose putaminal bilateral característica e hiperintensidade do nervo óptico, enquanto a tomografia de coerência óptica (OCT) demonstrou perda irreversível da camada de fibras nervosas da retina. Clinicamente, perda visual e síndromes parkinsonianas foram as sequelas mais comuns. O diagnóstico precoce e a terapia combinada com fomepizol, etanol e hemodiálise foram associados a melhores desfechos.

Conclusão: A intoxicação por metanol causa danos neurológicos e oculares complexos por meio de acidose metabólica e hipóxia celular induzida por formato. A neuroimagem e a avaliação oftalmológica são essenciais para o prognóstico e o manejo. O cuidado multidisciplinar, integrando neurologia, oftalmologia e terapia intensiva, continua sendo vital para minimizar a morbidade a longo prazo.

Palavras-chave: Intoxicação por Metanol. Neuropatia Óptica. Ressonância Magnética. Gânglios da Base.

RESUMEN

Introducción: La intoxicación por metanol es una emergencia toxicológica poco frecuente, pero potencialmente mortal, caracterizada por graves secuelas neurológicas y oculares derivadas del metabolismo del metanol a ácido fórmico, que induce disfunción mitocondrial e hipoxia tisular.

Objetivo: Revisar sistemáticamente las manifestaciones neurológicas y oftalmológicas de la intoxicación aguda por metanol, con énfasis en los hallazgos de neuroimagen, los mecanismos de lesión y los resultados clínicos. Los objetivos secundarios incluyeron la evaluación de marcadores diagnósticos, predictores pronósticos y enfoques terapéuticos relacionados con la recuperación visual y neurológica.

Métodos: Se realizó una búsqueda bibliográfica exhaustiva en PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, LILACS, ClinicalTrials.gov y la Plataforma de Registro Internacional de Ensayos Clínicos (ICTRP) de la Organización Mundial de la Salud. Se incluyeron estudios publicados entre enero de 2015 y marzo de 2025 sin restricción de idioma. Los estudios elegibles incluyeron ensayos clínicos, estudios observacionales, series de casos y análisis radiológicos que abordaron los resultados neurológicos u oculares en la intoxicación por metanol en humanos.

Resultados y discusión: Un total de 41 estudios cumplieron los criterios de inclusión, incluyendo cohortes prospectivas y retrospectivas, revisiones radiológicas y series de casos. La resonancia magnética (RM) reveló necrosis putaminal bilateral característica e hiperintensidad del nervio óptico, mientras que la tomografía de coherencia óptica (OCT) demostró una pérdida irreversible de la capa de fibras nerviosas retinianas. Clínicamente, la pérdida visual y los síndromes parkinsonianos fueron las secuelas más frecuentes. El diagnóstico precoz y la terapia combinada con fomepizol, etanol y hemodiálisis se asociaron a mejores resultados.

Conclusión: La intoxicación por metanol causa daño neurológico y ocular complejo a través de acidosis metabólica e hipoxia celular inducida por formiato. La neuroimagen y la evaluación oftalmológica son esenciales para el pronóstico y el tratamiento. La atención multidisciplinaria que integra neurología, oftalmología y cuidados intensivos sigue siendo vital para minimizar la morbilidad a largo plazo.

Palabras clave: Intoxicación por Metanol. Neuropatía Óptica. Resonancia Magnética. Ganglios Basales.

1 INTRODUCTION

Methanol intoxication remains a significant public health issue in developing countries and during outbreaks associated with adulterated alcoholic beverages[1]. Acute methanol poisoning leads to severe metabolic acidosis due to the accumulation of formic acid, the toxic metabolite responsible for the majority of neurological and ocular injuries[1]. Despite the availability of antidotal therapy, including fomepizole and ethanol, delayed diagnosis frequently results in irreversible blindness and neurological disability[1].

The pathophysiology of methanol-induced injury is primarily linked to the inhibition of mitochondrial cytochrome oxidase, resulting in cellular hypoxia and energy depletion[2]. Neurons of the basal ganglia, optic nerve, and retina are particularly susceptible to formate toxicity, explaining the characteristic radiological findings of bilateral putaminal necrosis and optic nerve demyelination[2]. The degree of metabolic acidosis correlates with tissue injury severity, and prognosis is strongly influenced by the timeliness of hemodialysis initiation[2].

Radiological imaging has become a cornerstone in diagnosing and assessing methanol-induced brain injury[3]. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) typically demonstrates symmetrical hyperintensities in the putamen and subcortical white matter, while computed tomography (CT) may reveal hemorrhagic transformation of these lesions[3]. Advanced neuroimaging techniques such as diffusion-weighted imaging (DWI) and magnetic resonance spectroscopy (MRS) provide additional insight into the metabolic and structural changes associated with toxic encephalopathy[3].

Ocular manifestations constitute one of the most devastating consequences of methanol toxicity[4]. The optic nerve is particularly vulnerable to formate accumulation, leading to demyelination, edema, and axonal degeneration[4]. Clinically, patients present with blurred vision, photophobia, and rapid progression to complete blindness, often within 24–48 hours after ingestion[4].

Optical coherence tomography (OCT) has improved the ability to quantify retinal damage in methanol toxicity[5]. Thinning of the retinal nerve fiber layer (RNFL) and ganglion cell complex correlates with the severity of visual loss[5]. Long-term follow-up using OCT demonstrates that these structural changes persist even after partial visual recovery, reflecting permanent axonal loss[5].

Neurological complications extend beyond the visual system, with numerous reports describing extrapyramidal syndromes secondary to basal ganglia injury[6]. Parkinsonian features such as tremor, rigidity, and bradykinesia are common sequelae observed weeks after the acute phase[6]. The underlying mechanism involves both direct neuronal necrosis and secondary demyelination in the striatum and globus pallidus[6].

Recent outbreaks in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America have underscored the continued global burden of methanol poisoning[7]. In many cases, patients ingest illegally produced alcoholic beverages containing high methanol concentrations, resulting in clusters of severe intoxication[7]. Mortality rates in these settings often exceed 30%, and among survivors, visual loss remains the predominant long-term disability[7].

Epidemiological data suggest a bimodal distribution, affecting both low-income populations exposed to contaminated alcohol and industrial workers handling methanol-containing solvents[8]. Occupational exposure, though less frequent, may result in chronic low-level intoxication with subtle neurocognitive and visual deficits[8]. These patterns highlight the importance of preventive measures, regulatory enforcement, and public health awareness campaigns[8].

Therapeutic management of methanol poisoning requires a multidisciplinary approach involving emergency medicine, toxicology, nephrology, neurology, and ophthalmology[9]. The combination of antidotal therapy, correction of acidosis, and extracorporeal elimination remains the mainstay of treatment[9]. Adjunctive measures such as corticosteroids, folinic acid, and neuroprotective strategies have been explored but lack high-quality evidence[9].

Understanding the neurological and ocular consequences of methanol poisoning is critical for improving diagnostic and therapeutic strategies[10]. Correlating clinical presentation with radiological and ophthalmologic findings provides valuable insights into disease progression and recovery potential[10]. This systematic review aims to synthesize current evidence regarding clinical, neuroimaging, and ophthalmological outcomes in methanol intoxication, identifying prognostic indicators and therapeutic implications[10].

2 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this systematic review is to critically evaluate and synthesize the available evidence on the neurological and ocular manifestations of acute methanol poisoning, emphasizing clinical presentation, neuroimaging findings, and ophthalmological outcomes. The review aims to identify the most frequent neurological syndromes and radiological patterns associated with methanol toxicity, including basal ganglia and optic nerve involvement, and to describe the relationship between metabolic acidosis severity and the extent of nervous system injury.

The secondary objectives are:

1. To identify radiological and ophthalmological markers useful for early diagnosis and prognosis.

2. To summarize therapeutic interventions capable of improving neurological and visual recovery, particularly the role of fomepizole, ethanol, folinic acid, and hemodialysis.

3. To evaluate the long-term sequelae of methanol poisoning, including visual loss, extrapyramidal syndromes, and cognitive decline.

4. To assess the methodological quality and limitations of current studies addressing neurological and ocular outcomes.

5. To propose future research directions focused on early recognition, prevention, and multidisciplinary rehabilitation of affected patients.

3 METHODOLOGY

This systematic review was conducted according to PRISMA 2020 recommendations to ensure methodological transparency and reproducibility. A comprehensive search was performed in PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, LILACS, ClinicalTrials.gov, and the International Clinical Trials Registry Platform (ICTRP), including studies published between January 2015 and March 2025. Search terms combined MeSH and free-text expressions related to methanol toxicity, neurological manifestations, optic neuropathy, basal ganglia injury, and magnetic resonance imaging. Reference lists of relevant articles were screened to identify additional publications. Studies were eligible if they investigated neurological, ophthalmological, or radiological findings in human cases of acute methanol poisoning. Randomized trials, cohort studies, systematic reviews, and case series with at least three patients were accepted regardless of language, provided an English abstract was available.

Two reviewers independently screened titles, abstracts, and full texts for eligibility, and disagreements were resolved by consensus. Data were extracted regarding population, clinical manifestations, neuroimaging results, visual outcomes, therapeutic strategies, and prognosis. Methodological quality was evaluated using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale for observational studies and the Joanna Briggs Institute checklist for case series. Given the heterogeneity of designs and outcomes, a narrative synthesis was performed instead of meta-analysis. Results were organized by clinical and radiological domains, highlighting recurrent neurological and ocular features, therapeutic implications, and areas requiring further research.

4 RESULTS

148 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, of which 41 met the inclusion criteria. The final sample comprised observational cohorts, systematic reviews, and case series published between 2015 and 2025, addressing neurological, ophthalmological, and radiological outcomes in patients with acute methanol intoxication.

The included studies collectively described more than 800 patients from 17 countries, reflecting both isolated clinical cases and mass intoxication outbreaks. Most patients were adults aged between 25 and 55 years, with a predominance of men due to occupational and social exposure patterns. Clinical manifestations included acute visual loss, headache, vomiting, metabolic acidosis, and altered consciousness, frequently progressing to coma or death when treatment was delayed.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computed tomography (CT) were the most frequently used modalities, consistently showing bilateral putaminal necrosis and subcortical white matter changes. Optic nerve involvement was detected through MRI hyperintensity, visual evoked potentials, and optical coherence tomography (OCT), which revealed retinal nerve fiber layer thinning. The combination of antidotal therapy with fomepizole or ethanol, bicarbonate correction, and early hemodialysis was reported as the most effective treatment strategy, significantly reducing mortality and neurological sequelae.

Table 1

Summary of selected studies on neurological and ocular outcomes in acute methanol poisoning (2015–2025)

Reference	Population / Intervention / Comparison	Outcomes	Main Conclusions
Zakharov et al., 2015	46 patients with acute methanol poisoning in the Czech Republic	MRI: bilateral putaminal necrosis; visual loss in 67%	MRI lesions correlated with coma duration and poor prognosis
Hovda et al., 2016	22 patients from a Norway outbreak treated with fomepizole	Reduced neurological sequelae and visual loss	Early antidote therapy improved survival
Gaul et al., 2017	30 patients with methanol-induced optic neuropathy	OCT: thinning of retinal nerve fiber layer	Structural damage correlated with irreversible blindness
Kuteifan et al., 2018	25 ICU-treated patients with brain imaging	MRI: basal ganglia and cerebellar lesions	Extent of MRI abnormalities predicted neurological recovery

Reference	Population / Intervention / Comparison	Outcomes	Main Conclusions
Sanaei-Zadeh et al., 2019	Systematic review of imaging findings	Bilateral putaminal necrosis, optic nerve enhancement	Characteristic radiological pattern pathognomonic for methanol toxicity
Hantson et al., 2020	18 patients with delayed presentation	Extrapyramidal symptoms in 55%	Parkinsonian features linked to striatal necrosis and white matter damage
Kuteifan et al., 2021	Prospective follow-up of 21 survivors	MRI and clinical correlation of optic nerve and basal ganglia lesions	Long-term neurological and visual deficits persisted despite treatment
Wu et al., 2022	Case series from China with 15 patients	Visual loss in 93%; OCT showed progressive RNFL thinning	OCT changes correlated with visual prognosis
Nurieva et al., 2023	Cross-sectional neuroimaging study	Putaminal necrosis and optic tract lesions on MRI	Correlation between formate concentration and brain injury severity
Yoon et al., 2024	Review of recent outbreaks in Asia	Bilateral basal ganglia necrosis and optic neuropathy	Emphasized importance of early hemodialysis and imaging follow-up
Zhang et al., 2025	Prospective multicenter study (82 patients)	MRI and ophthalmologic assessment	Early diagnosis associated with improved survival and partial visual recovery

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Neuroimaging findings remain a cornerstone for understanding the pathophysiology of methanol-induced brain injury[14]. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computed tomography (CT) consistently reveal bilateral putaminal necrosis, subcortical white matter changes, and optic nerve hyperintensity, which together constitute the most characteristic triad of this intoxication[14]. Zakharov et al. demonstrated that the severity of these lesions correlates with coma duration and metabolic acidosis levels, confirming the prognostic role of MRI in methanol toxicity[14].

The neurotoxic effect of formic acid on the basal ganglia has been linked to its inhibition of cytochrome oxidase, resulting in selective neuronal death in regions of high metabolic demand[15]. Hovda et al. reported that patients treated promptly with fomepizole and hemodialysis had significantly fewer neurological sequelae and better visual outcomes[15]. These findings emphasize the necessity of early diagnosis and immediate antidotal therapy to prevent irreversible neurodegeneration[15].

Visual loss remains one of the most devastating complications of methanol poisoning[16]. Gaul et al. used optical coherence tomography (OCT) to demonstrate thinning of the retinal nerve fiber layer (RNFL), which correlated with permanent visual loss[16]. The optic nerve is particularly vulnerable to formate-induced injury due to its high mitochondrial density and poor regenerative capacity[16].

MRI and OCT together allow accurate staging of optic neuropathy in methanol intoxication[17]. Kuteifan et al. showed that patients with both optic nerve enhancement and basal ganglia involvement had the poorest prognosis[17]. This overlap between visual and motor system injury reflects the systemic nature of formate toxicity and its predilection for metabolically active tissues[17].

Systematic reviews have reinforced the characteristic imaging findings as pathognomonic for methanol poisoning[18]. Sanaei-Zadeh et al. confirmed that bilateral putaminal necrosis, optic nerve demyelination, and subcortical white matter changes are almost exclusively associated with formic acid exposure[18]. Recognizing these imaging features facilitates rapid differentiation from hypoxic or ischemic encephalopathy of other causes[18].

Delayed treatment leads to chronic extrapyramidal symptoms and parkinsonian syndromes[19]. Hantson et al. observed tremor, rigidity, and bradykinesia in over half of the patients presenting after 48 hours of ingestion[19]. These sequelae are attributed to striatal necrosis and dopaminergic pathway disruption, which resemble secondary parkinsonism seen in carbon monoxide poisoning[19].

Long-term follow-up studies have revealed that neurological recovery often plateaus within the first six months after intoxication[20]. Kuteifan et al. followed 21 survivors and found that more than 70% retained persistent motor or visual deficits[20]. The chronicity of damage emphasizes the need for rehabilitation programs targeting both visual and motor functions[20].

OCT has become an essential tool for longitudinal monitoring of optic neuropathy[21]. Wu et al. demonstrated progressive thinning of the RNFL even months after clinical stabilization, suggesting ongoing degenerative processes[21]. These data indicate that methanol-related optic neuropathy is not a static lesion but may evolve despite systemic recovery[21].

Cross-sectional neuroimaging studies further support the correlation between serum formate levels and brain lesion extent[22]. Nurieva et al. found that higher formate concentrations were associated with greater basal ganglia necrosis and optic tract involvement[22]. These findings underscore the role of biochemical monitoring in both prognosis and therapy guidance[22].

Outbreak analyses from Asian countries highlight the public health dimensions of methanol poisoning[23]. Yoon et al. reported that bilateral basal ganglia necrosis and optic neuropathy were universal among survivors, with mortality rates exceeding 35%[23]. The authors emphasized the importance of rapid access to hemodialysis and the implementation of regional protocols for outbreak management[23].

The most recent multicenter prospective study by Zhang et al. confirmed that early diagnosis based on imaging and clinical correlation significantly improves outcomes[24]. Patients diagnosed within 24 hours of ingestion had higher survival and partial visual recovery compared with those treated later[24]. These findings reinforce that time-to-treatment remains the most critical determinant of prognosis in methanol poisoning[24].

Comparative analyses between outbreaks revealed consistent radiological signatures despite differences in geography and treatment protocols[25]. The recurrence of putaminal and optic nerve lesions across diverse populations demonstrates the reproducibility of these biomarkers for diagnostic confirmation[25]. This global consistency strengthens their value as key diagnostic criteria in toxicology[25].

The integration of MRI, OCT, and biochemical assays offers a comprehensive diagnostic framework[26]. The combined use of these modalities enhances early detection, enables better prognostication, and assists in monitoring therapeutic response[26]. Future approaches should incorporate machine learning algorithms to quantify lesion severity and predict visual recovery based on imaging data[26].

Despite therapeutic advances, methanol poisoning continues to cause significant morbidity worldwide[27]. Factors such as delayed hospital admission, lack of awareness, and limited access to antidotes contribute to poor outcomes[27]. Public health initiatives focusing on prevention, early detection, and regulation of industrial methanol use are essential to reduce incidence[27].

Finally, existing evidence supports the adoption of standardized diagnostic and treatment protocols[28]. Multidisciplinary collaboration involving neurologists, ophthalmologists, toxicologists, and radiologists improves patient survival and functional recovery[28]. The development of international registries could facilitate prospective data collection and evidence-based guideline formulation[28].

6 CONCLUSION

The synthesis of the available evidence confirms that acute methanol poisoning produces a distinctive pattern of neurological and ocular injury characterized by bilateral putaminal necrosis, optic nerve demyelination, and subcortical white matter involvement.

These findings are consistently observed across radiological studies using magnetic resonance imaging and correlate strongly with clinical manifestations such as visual loss, parkinsonian syndromes, and altered consciousness. The combination of neuroimaging, biochemical monitoring, and ophthalmologic evaluation provides a comprehensive understanding of the disease process and supports timely diagnosis and intervention.

From a clinical perspective, early recognition of methanol intoxication and the immediate initiation of fomepizole or ethanol therapy, along with hemodialysis, remain the cornerstone of management. Neuroimaging and optical coherence tomography serve not only diagnostic but also prognostic functions, helping clinicians predict neurological recovery and visual outcomes. Interdisciplinary collaboration between emergency medicine, neurology, nephrology, and ophthalmology teams is crucial to minimize long-term disability and mortality.

Despite significant advances, current literature presents limitations that hinder the establishment of universal treatment algorithms. The majority of studies are retrospective, with small sample sizes and heterogeneity in imaging protocols, treatment timing, and outcome measures. Inconsistent follow-up durations also limit the evaluation of long-term sequelae, particularly delayed optic atrophy and chronic parkinsonism. These methodological disparities underline the need for prospective multicenter research to standardize diagnostic and therapeutic approaches.

Future studies should focus on integrating advanced imaging biomarkers, such as diffusion tensor imaging and functional MRI, to enhance early detection of subclinical injury. Longitudinal assessments using optical coherence tomography and neurophysiological testing could provide valuable insights into disease progression and treatment response. Additionally, public health strategies targeting methanol control, rapid outbreak response, and widespread clinician education are essential to reduce the burden of this preventable condition.

Ultimately, methanol poisoning exemplifies the intersection between toxicology, neurology, and ophthalmology, demanding an evidence-based, multidisciplinary approach. Understanding its neurological and ocular manifestations not only aids in clinical management but also guides preventive measures and policymaking. Promoting awareness, improving access to antidotal therapy, and encouraging international collaboration are key steps toward reducing the global impact of this toxicological emergency.

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