

Paroxysmal Sympathetic Hyperactivity Syndrome in the Setting of Fat Emboli Syndrome

A Case Report of Polytrauma in an Adolescent Female

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Key Conditions

Paroxysmal Sympathetic Hyperactivity (PSH)

Complication

Fat Embolism Syndrome (FES)

Clinical Setting

Polytrauma

Introduction & Overview

+ Case Background

15-year-old female with **polytrauma**

Multiple long bone fractures

Development of **fat embolism syndrome**

Complicated by **paroxysmal sympathetic hyperactivity**

🧠 Key Topics

Background on PSH and FES

Diagnostic challenges and tools

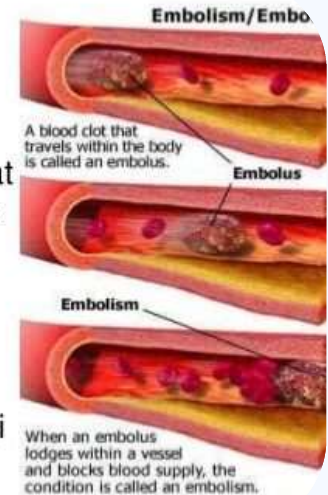
Treatment approaches

Clinical implications

Fat Emboli: Fat particles or droplets that travel through the circulation

Fat Embolism: A process by which fat emboli passes into the bloodstream and lodges within a blood vessel.

Fat Embolism Syndrome (FES): serious manifestation of fat embolism occasionally causes multi system dysfunction, the lungs are always involved and next is brain



Background on Paroxysmal Sympathetic Hyperactivity

Definition

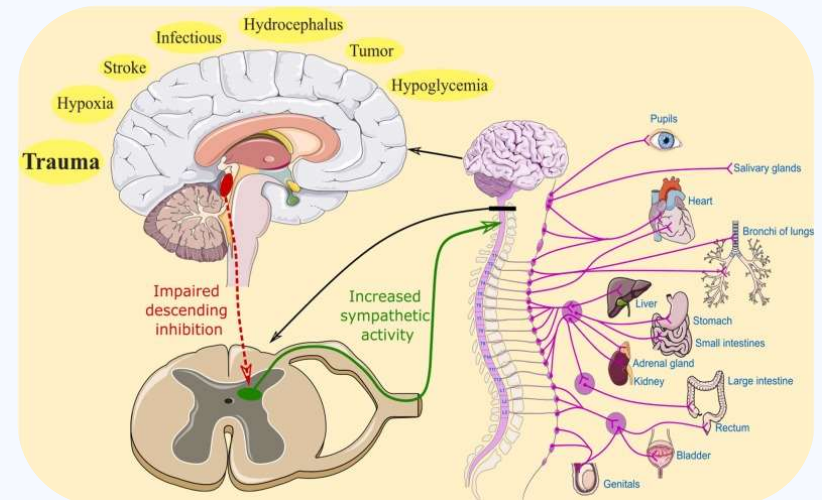
- ▶ Colloquially known as "**neuro-storming**"
- ▶ Potentially **life-threatening** complication after traumatic brain injuries
- ▶ Results from massive release of catecholamines in the brain

Clinical Features

- ♥ **Tachycardia** and hypertension
- ≡ **Tachypnea** and diaphoresis
- ✎ **Posturing** and fever

Diagnostic Challenge

Patients may experience all or only some features, making diagnosis challenging



Background on Fat Embolism Syndrome

Definition

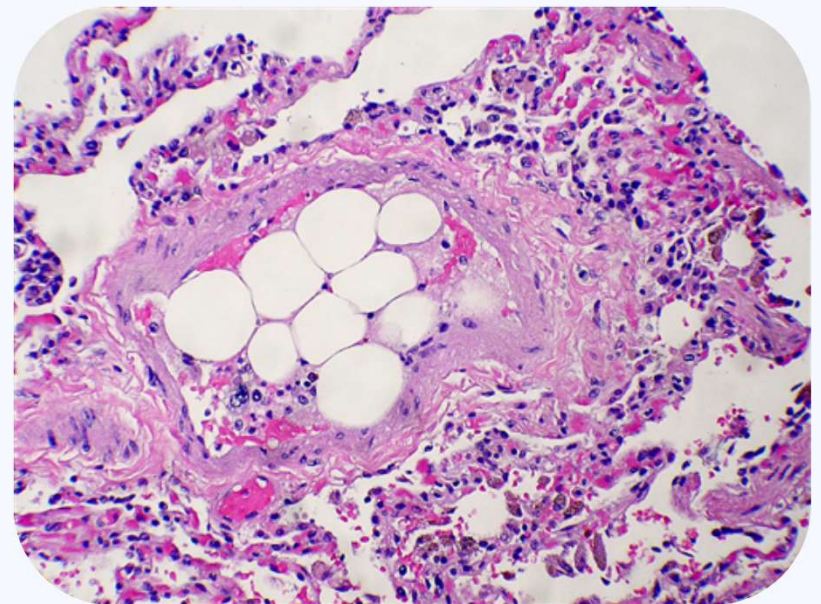
- ▶ Complication of **long bone fractures**
- ▶ Results from fat emboli entering circulation
- ▶ Can affect **pulmonary** and **cerebral** systems

Clinical Manifestations

- ⇒ **Pulmonary:** Respiratory failure, hypoxia
- 🧠 **Cerebral:** Neurologic deficits, confusion
- 👤 **Cutaneous:** Petechial rash

Risk Factors

Multiple long bone fractures, pelvic fractures, delayed fixation, young age



Case Presentation - Initial Assessment



Previously Healthy Female

15 years old

Mechanism of Injury

- ▶ **High-speed motor vehicle collision**
- ▶ Restrained passenger
- ▶ Front-end collision with **significant vehicle damage**
- ▶ Both airbags deployed

Initial Findings

- ▶ Glasgow Coma Scale: **15**
- ▶ Transient loss of consciousness
- ▶ Amnestic to events



Initial Imaging

CT head and cervical spine negative upon arrival

Case Presentation - Injuries

Skeletal Injuries

- ▶ **Displaced comminuted fracture** of left femur
- ▶ Multiple pelvic fractures
- ▶ Bilateral tibia/fibula fractures
- ▶ Left side: **significantly comminuted**

Other Injuries

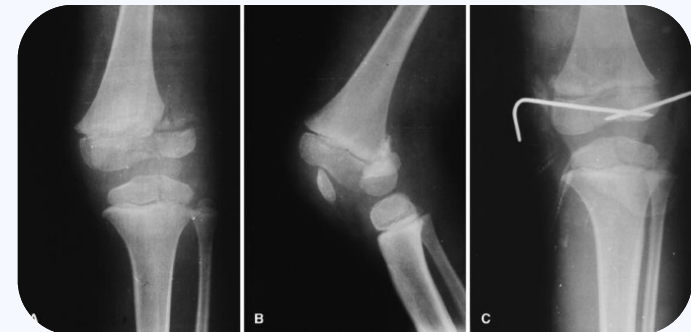
- ▶ Small left apical pneumothorax (<5%)
- ▶ Grade 2 liver laceration
- ▶ Two left rib fractures
- ▶ Multiple ecchymoses

Initial Management

Left lower extremity placed in traction upon admission to ICU



Displaced comminuted fracture of left femur



Tibia/fibula fractures with internal fixation

Case Presentation - Neurological Decline

⚠️ Neurological Status Change

9 hours GCS dropped from **15 to 7**
Only opening eyes and **extensor posturing** to pain

🏠 Interventions

Immediate **Intubated** for airway protection
Urgent repeat CT imaging with angiography

🔍 Imaging Findings

Results No worsening bleeding or new injuries
No central pulmonary embolism

Laboratory Findings

WBC

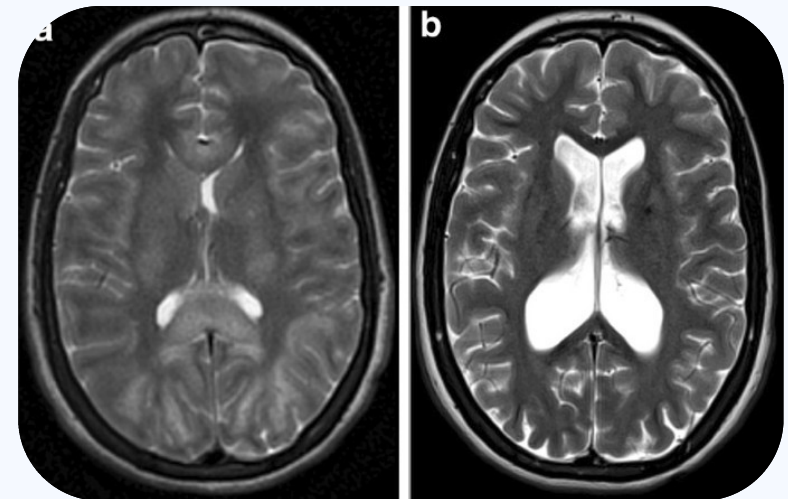
22.11

Lactic Acid

4.6

CK

3,216



Brain imaging showing changes after neurological decline

Seizure Management

Patient loaded with Keppra and EEG ordered despite no visualized seizures

Case Presentation - Imaging Findings

Day 0

Initial CT

Day 0

Repeat CT

Day 2

MRI

Day 3

Echo

CT Scan Findings

- ✓ Initial CT: **Negative** for intracranial pathology
- ✓ Repeat CT: No new injuries or bleeding
- ✓ No central pulmonary embolism

MRI Findings

- ! **Innumerable multifocal bilateral foci** of restricted diffusion
- ! Associated areas of cytotoxic edema
- ! Possibly representing **fat embolism phenomenon**

EEG Results

Negative for seizures or epileptiform activity

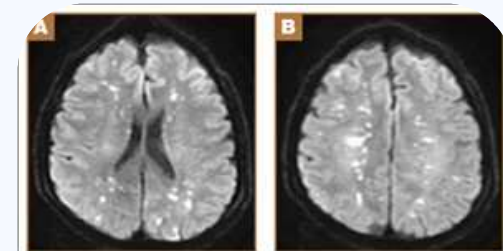
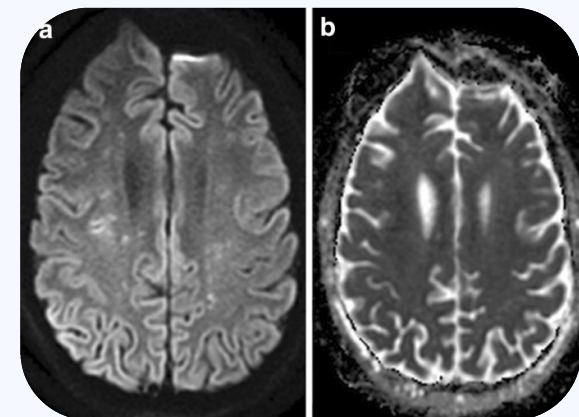


Figure 3. Consecutive axial diffusion-weighted magnetic resonance imaging (A) caudal to (B) cranial. Note the many punctate hyperintense foci in the bilateral cerebral hemispheres. These areas showed low signal on susceptibility-weighted sequences, indicating multiple microhemorrhages, a pattern consistent with fat embolism syndrome.

MRI brain showing multiple hyperintense foci representing fat emboli



MRI with DWI and ADC sequences showing fat emboli

Case Presentation - MRI Findings

🧠 MRI Brain Results

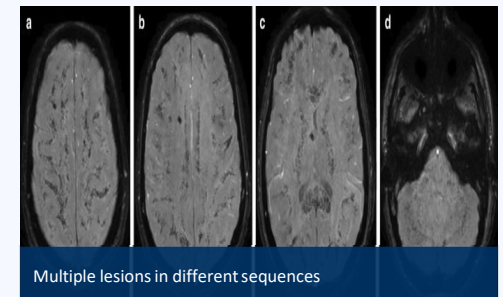
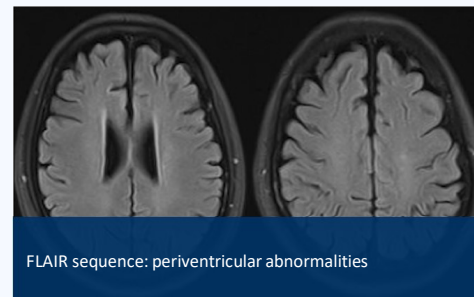
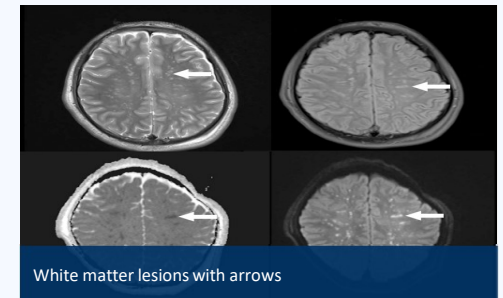
- ! Innumerable multifocal bilateral foci of restricted diffusion
- ! Associated areas of cytotoxic edema
- ! Findings consistent with fat embolism phenomenon

💡 Diagnostic Considerations

- ✓ Fat embolism syndrome - **Most likely**
- ✗ Diffuse axonal injury - Less likely
- ✗ Infection/Sepsis - No source identified

Key Finding

Subacute change in mental status with initial negative head CT makes FES the leading diagnosis



Timeline Correlation

MRI findings correlate with timeline of subacute brain injury following long bone fractures

Case Presentation - Differential Diagnosis



Fat Embolism Syndrome

Most likely diagnosis based on:

- Subacute change in mental status
- Multiple long bone fractures
- MRI findings consistent with fat emboli



Diffuse Axonal Injury

Ruled out because:

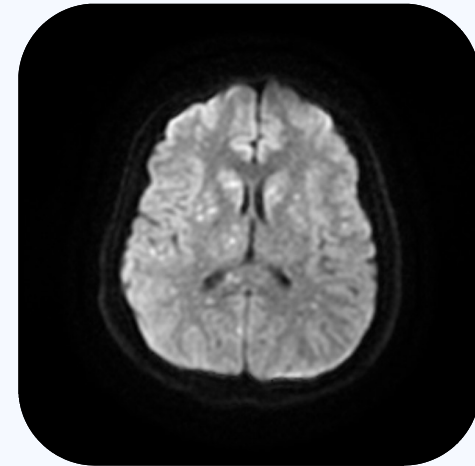
- Initial head CT was negative
- No intracranial hemorrhage or edema



Infection/Sepsis

Ruled out because:

- No hollow viscous injury on abdominal CT
- No intra-abdominal pathology on repeat CTs
- No other infectious etiology identified



Diagnostic Timeline

The **subacute onset** of neurological symptoms following long bone fractures with initial negative head CT strongly supports FES as the primary diagnosis

Key Factor

The timeline of symptom onset correlated with the pathophysiology of fat emboli formation and migration to cerebral circulation

Case Presentation - PFO Discovery

♥ Echocardiogram Findings

- ▶ Performed on **ICU Day 3**
- ▶ Detected **patent foramen ovale (PFO)**
- ▶ Left ventricle ejection fraction: **55-65%**
- ▶ No valvular lesions

💡 Clinical Significance

- ▶ PFO provides **potential pathway** for fat emboli to bypass pulmonary filtration
- ▶ May explain **cerebral fat emboli** despite absence of pulmonary embolism

12%

PFO identified in only 12% of patients with fat embolism syndrome

Important Note

Absence of PFO does not preclude development of FES



Echocardiogram showing blood flow through patent foramen ovale



Case Presentation - PSH Symptoms

ICU Day 4

Onset of PSH symptoms

Clinical Manifestations



Tachycardia
147 bpm



Hypertension
150/99 mmHg



Tachypnea
27 breaths/min

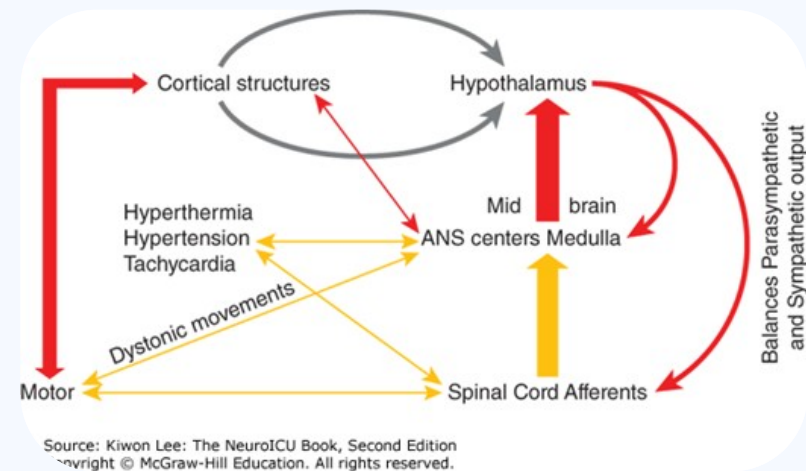


Temperature
37.9°C

Additional Symptoms

- ▶ Mechanical asynchrony with breathing
- ▶ Muscle spasms with **extensor posturing**
- ▶ **Diaphoresis** (excessive sweating)

Diagnostic Challenge



Brain structures and autonomic nervous system interactions in PSH

PSH Diagnostic Score

Patient scored **18** on the PSH diagnostic likelihood tool, confirming probable diagnosis

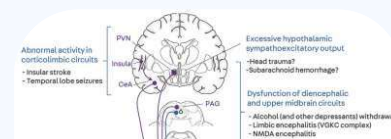
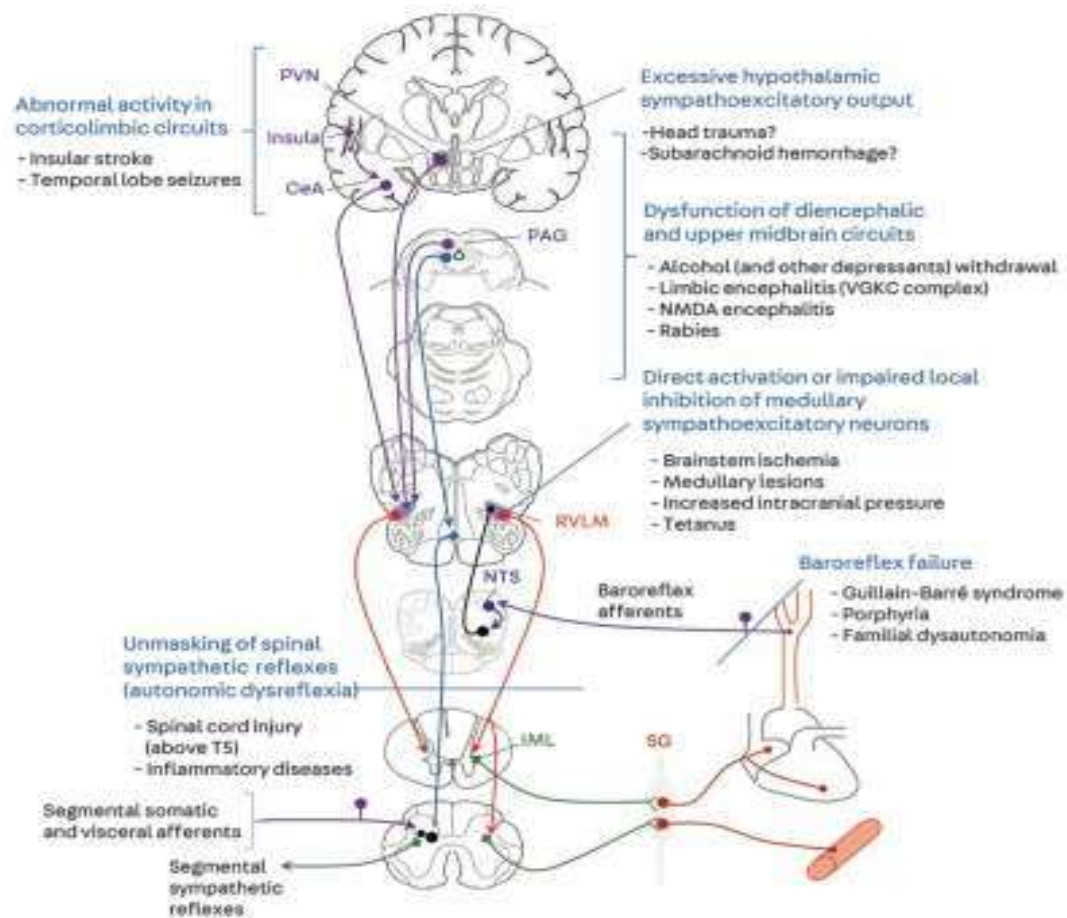


TABLE 1: Paroxysmal sympathetic hyperactivity (PSH) diagnostic likelihood tool [1].

	Clinical Feature Scale (CFS)				Score
	0	1	2	3	
Heart rate	<100	100-119	120-139	>140	3
Respiratory rate	<18	18-23	24-29	>30	2
Systolic blood pressure	<140	140-159	160-179	>180	2
Temperature	<37	37-37.9	38-38.9	>39	1
Sweating	Nil	Mild	Moderate	Severe	2
Posturing during episodes	Nil	Mild	Moderate	Severe	2
				CFS subtotal	12
Severity of clinical features	Nil		0		
	Mild		1-6		
	Moderate		7-12		
	Severe		≥13		
Diagnosis likelihood tool (DLT)—1 point for each feature present					
Clinical features occur simultaneously					1
Episodes are paroxysmal in nature					1
Sympathetic over-reactivity to normally nonpainful stimuli					1
Features persist ≥3 consecutive days					1
Features persist ≥2-week postbrain injury					0
Features persist despite treatment of alternative differential diagnoses					0
Medication administered to decrease sympathetic features					1
≥2 episodes daily					1
Absence of parasympathetic features during episodes					0
Absence of other presumed cause of features					0
Antecedent of acquired brain injury					0
				DLT subtotal	6
Combined total (CFS+DLT)					
PSH diagnostic likelihood	Unlikely		<8		
	Possible		8-16		
	Probable		≥17		

Based on the PSH diagnostic likelihood tool, the patient has a Clinical Feature Scale of 12 which indicates moderate severity of clinical features and a diagnosis likelihood tool of 6. The combined total scores equal 18 which indicates that PSH is the probable diagnosis. The patient's score is calculated in bold values.



Schematic representation of the levels of neuraxial injury and proposed mechanisms for the development of autonomic hyperactivity.

CeA = central nucleus of the amygdala; IML = intermediolateral cell column; NMDA = N-methyl-D-aspartate
 NTS = nucleus of the solitary tract; PAG = periaqueductal gray; PVN = paraventricular nucleus; RVLM = rostral ventrolateral medulla; SG = sympathetic ganglion; VGKC = voltage-gated potassium channel.
 Adapted with permission from Benarroch EE.¹ © Oxford University Press.

Robinson AA

PSH Diagnostic Tool

Diagnostic Likelihood Tool

✓ Clinical Feature Scale (CFS)

✗ Diagnosis Likelihood Tool (DLT)

<i>Diagnosis Likelihood Tool (DLT)</i>	
Clinical features occur simultaneously	
Episodes are paroxysmal in nature	
Sympathetic over-reactivity to normally non-painful stimuli	
Features persist ≥3 consecutive days	
Features persist ≥2 weeks post -brain injury	
Features persist despite treatment of alternative differential diagnoses	
Medication administered to decrease sympathetic features	
≥2 episodes daily	
Absence of parasympathetic features during episodes	
Absence of other presumed cause of features	
Antecedent acquired brain injury	
(Score 1 point for each feature present)	DLT subtotal

Diagnostic Categories

- ▶ **Unlikely:** Score < 8
- ▶ **Possible:** Score 8-16
- ▶ **Probable:** Score ≥ 17

Patient's Result

With a score of **18**, the patient's PSH diagnosis is classified as **probable**

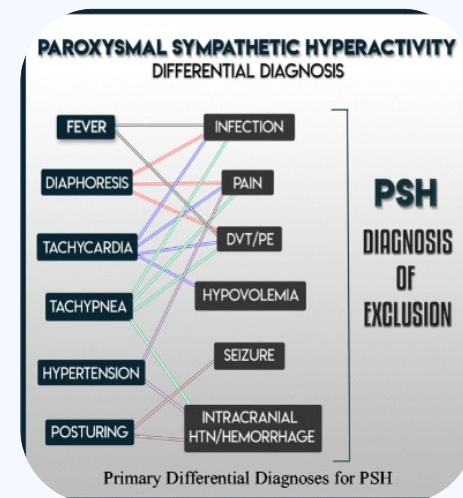
Diagnosis Likelihood Tool (DLT)

Clinical features occur simultaneously	
Episodes are paroxysmal in nature	
Sympathetic over-reactivity to normally non-painful stimuli	
Features persist ≥ 3 consecutive days	
Features persist ≥ 2 weeks post -brain injury	
Features persist despite treatment of alternative differential diagnoses	
Medication administered to decrease sympathetic features	
≥ 2 episodes daily	
Absence of parasympathetic features during episodes	
Absence of other presumed cause of features	
Antecedent acquired brain injury	
(Score 1 point for each feature present)	DLT subtotal

PSH Diagnostic Tool (continued)

Patient's Diagnostic Score

Clinical Feature Scale (CFS)



Diagnosis Likelihood Tool (DLT)

Diagnostic Interpretation

Score of **18** indicates **probable** PSH diagnosis (≥ 17 points)

Case Presentation - Treatment

Pharmacological Management



Propranolol

20mg three times daily

Beta-blocker to control sympathetic hyperactivity



Oxycodone

Scheduled every **4 hours**

Adequate pain control to reduce sympathetic response

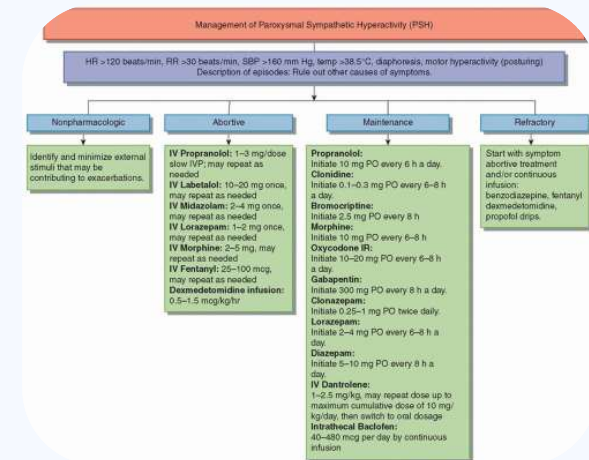
Additional Interventions

- ▶ **Seizure prophylaxis** with Keppra due to cerebral edema
- ▶ EEG monitoring to rule out seizure activity
- ▶ Aggressive **physical therapy** and speech therapy

Treatment Response

Frequency of PSH episodes **decreased** over the next few days

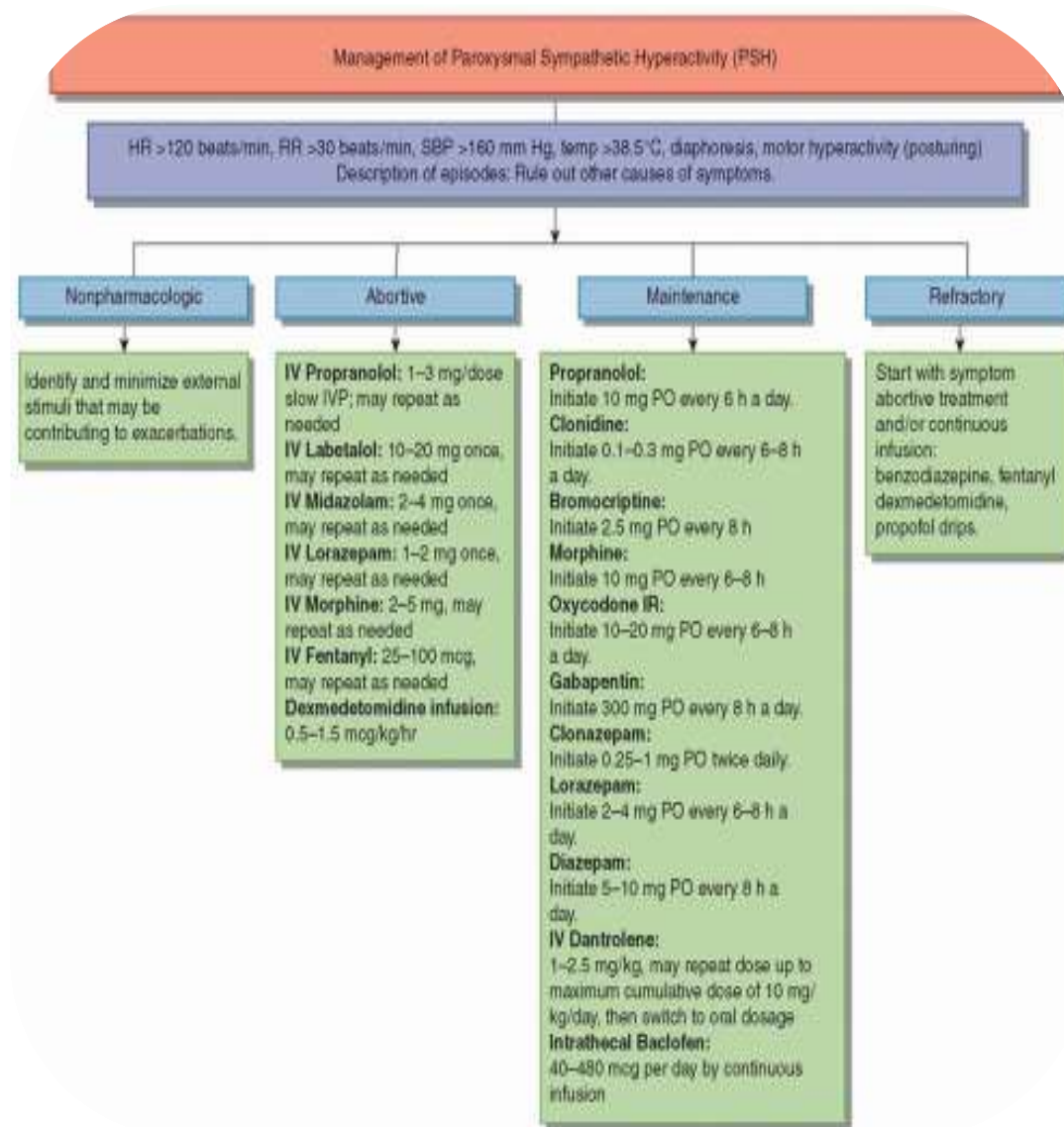
Patient became appropriate for definitive orthopedic fixation on ICU day 7



Medication management approach for PSH

Alternative Treatment Options

- ▶ **Steroids** (dexamethasone, methylprednisolone)
- ▶ **Albumin** to bind fatty acids
- ▶ **5% alcohol glucose** solution
- ▶ **Gabapentin** as adjunct therapy



Case Presentation - Surgical Interventions

Surgical Timeline

Day 3

Initial Orthopedic Procedures

Internal fixation of right ankle

External fixation of left femur

Day 7

Definitive Orthopedic Fixation

Performed after hemodynamic and neurologic stabilization

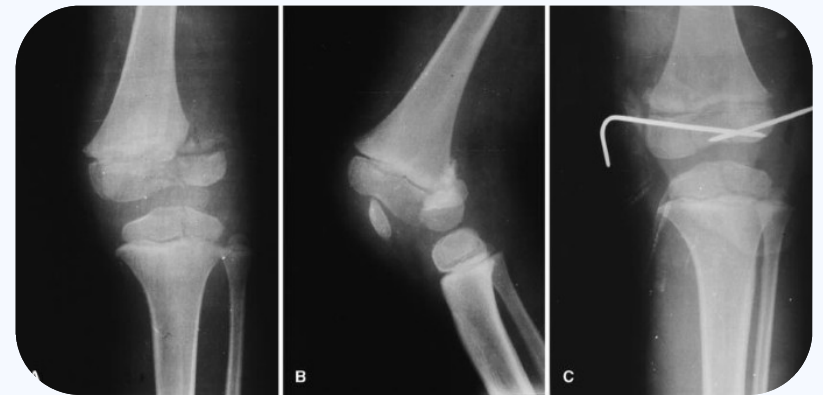
Decreased PSH episodes enabled surgery

Later

Morel-Lavallée Lesion Management

Operative evacuation of hematoma

Placement of two JP drains



Internal fixation of orthopedic injuries

Surgical Management Goals

- ▶ Stabilize fractures to **reduce fat emboli** risk
- ▶ Address **Morel-Lavallée lesion** from seatbelt injury
- ▶ Optimize timing based on neurological status

Surgical Considerations

Outcome

Case Presentation - Recovery

Recovery Milestones

Day 4

Neurological Improvement

Spontaneous eye opening, improved movements

Day 18

Successful Extubation

Airway protection maintained

Day 23

ICU Transfer

Moved to floor for continued recovery

Day 39

Discharge

Home with outpatient follow-up

18

Days on ventilator

23

Days in ICU

39

Total hospital stay



Rehabilitation Plan

Aggressive physical therapy for mobility

Speech therapy for communication

Continued **home physical therapy**

Discharge Plan

Home with outpatient orthopedic follow-up and continued home physical

Discussion - FES Diagnosis

🧠 Diagnostic Process



Timeline Correlation

Subacute change in mental status following long bone fractures



Exclusion of Alternatives

Initial negative head CT ruled out **diffuse axonal injury**



MRI Confirmation

Multiple hyperintense foci representing **fat emboli**

! Key Diagnostic Factors



Multiple long bone fractures



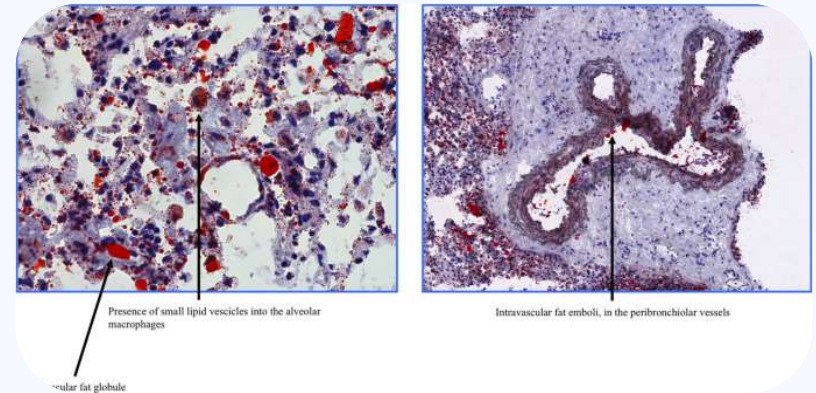
Subacute neurological decline



PFO facilitating cerebral emboli



MRI with characteristic findings



Microscopic view of lung tissue showing fat emboli



Diagnostic Challenge

FES diagnosis in polytrauma patients requires **comprehensive evaluation** of history, clinical findings, and imaging



Role of PFO

PFO provided pathway for fat emboli to bypass pulmonary filtration, explaining **cerebral involvement** without significant pulmonary embolism

Discussion - PSH Diagnosis

! Diagnostic Challenges



Symptom Overlap

PSH symptoms similar to **pain response** in polytrauma patients



Variable Presentation

Patients may experience **all or only some** PSH features



Differential Diagnosis

Multiple potential causes in polytrauma: **sepsis, PE, withdrawal**

✓ Diagnostic Tool Utility



Standardized assessment



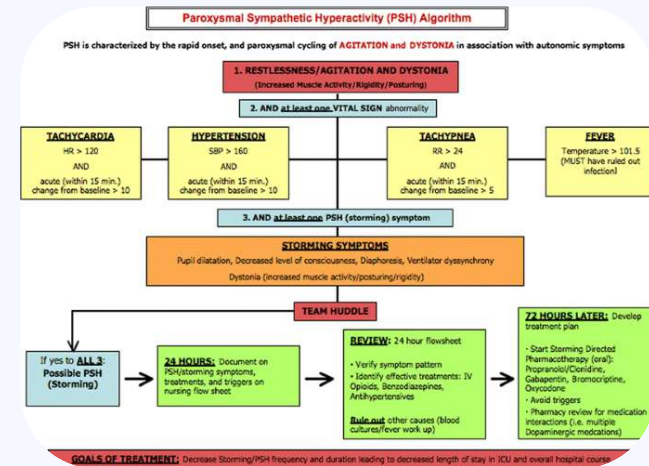
Quantitative scoring



Temporal criteria



Objective confirmation



PSH diagnostic algorithm showing systematic approach to diagnosis

Case Application

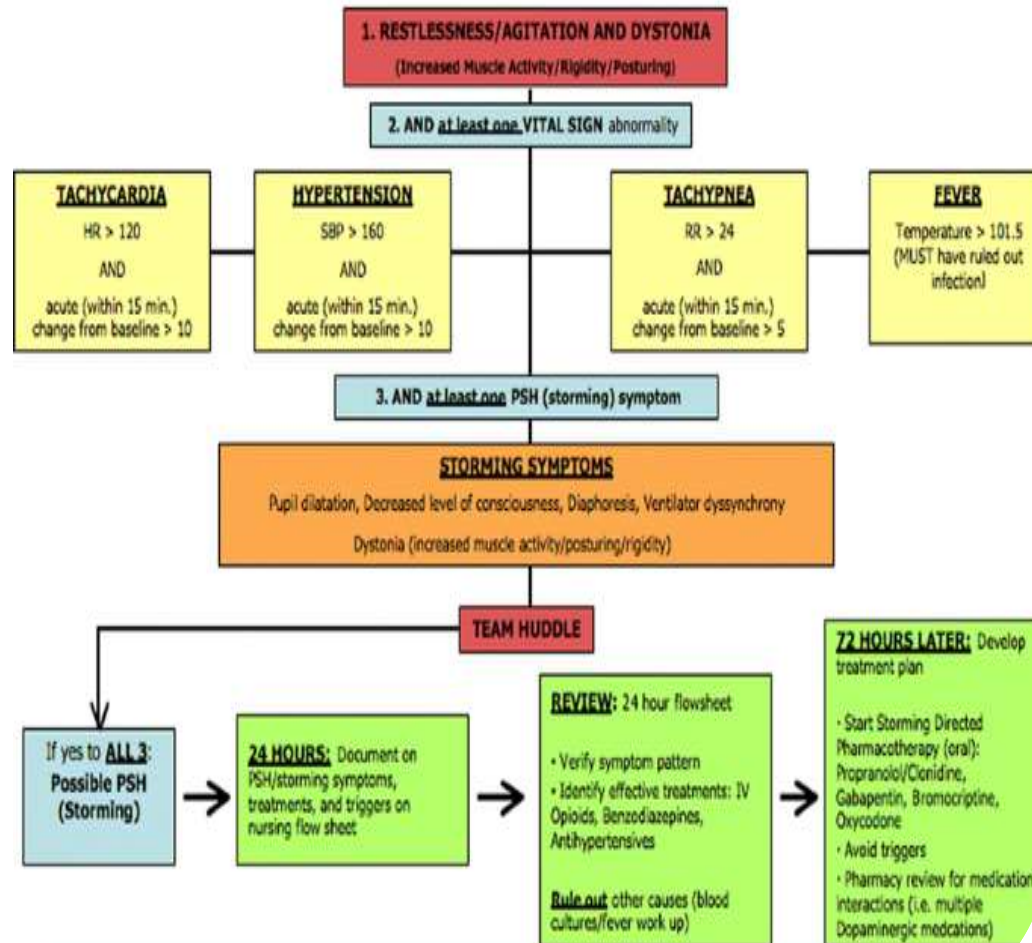
Patient scored **18** on PSH diagnostic tool, confirming probable diagnosis despite initial challenges

Clinical Impact

Early recognition enabled targeted treatment with improved outcomes

Paroxysmal Sympathetic Hyperactivity (PSH) Algorithm

PSH is characterized by the rapid onset, and paroxysmal cycling of **AGITATION** and **DYSTONIA** in association with autonomic symptoms



GOALS OF TREATMENT: Decrease Storming/PSH frequency and duration leading to decreased length of stay in ICU and overall hospital costs

Discussion - Treatment Approaches for FES

Pharmacological Options



Steroids

Dexamethasone or methylprednisolone

Reduces cerebral edema



Albumin

Binds with **fatty acids**
Restores blood volumes



5% Alcohol Glucose

Inhibits formation of **fat droplets**



Lipid-soluble Drugs

Target fat emboli directly

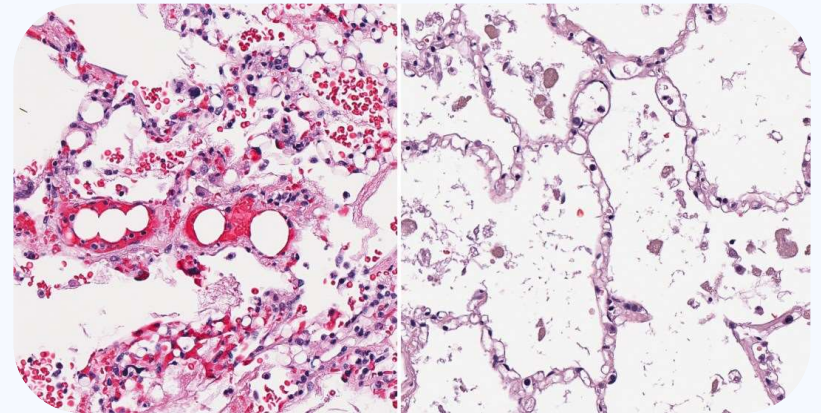
Treatment Goals

Reduce load of fat emboli and minimize cerebral edema to limit PSH episodes



Mechanisms of Action

- ▶ **Anti-inflammatory** effects reduce tissue damage



Comparison of lung tissue with and without fat emboli

Supportive Care

- ▶ **Early immobilization** of fractures with traction
- ▶ **Respiratory support** for pulmonary involvement
- ▶ **Neurological monitoring** for cerebral changes

Treatment Limitations

No specific treatment available for FES

Methylprednisolone

1.5 to 2.0 mg/kg, iv, every
8 hours for 3-6 doses



Albumin

5% or 25% solution, with an
initial bolus of **300-500 mL**



Discussion - Treatment Approaches for PSH

Pharmacological Management



Beta-blockers

Propranolol

Reduces sympathetic activity



Gabapentin

Adjunct therapy for **neuropathic pain**



Opioids

Oxycodone

Pain control to reduce sympathetic response



Benzodiazepines

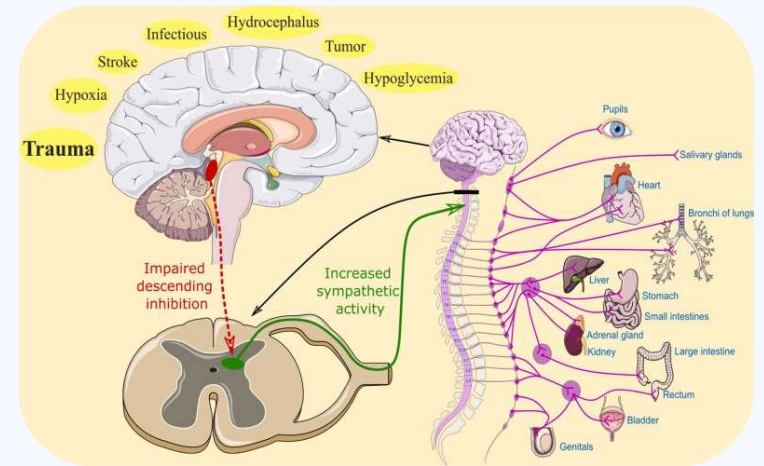
Diazepam

Reduces muscle spasms and anxiety

Treatment Principles

Control sympathetic hyperactivity to limit long-term effects on brain and body

Mechanisms of Action



Brain injury affecting spinal cord and increasing sympathetic activity

Patient-Specific Considerations

- ▶ **Individualized dosing** based on response
- ▶ **Combination therapy** often required
- ▶ **Regular monitoring** of vital signs

Discussion - Patient-Specific Considerations

Unique Patient Factors



Adolescent Patient

15-year-old female with developing physiology
Different drug metabolism and dosing requirements



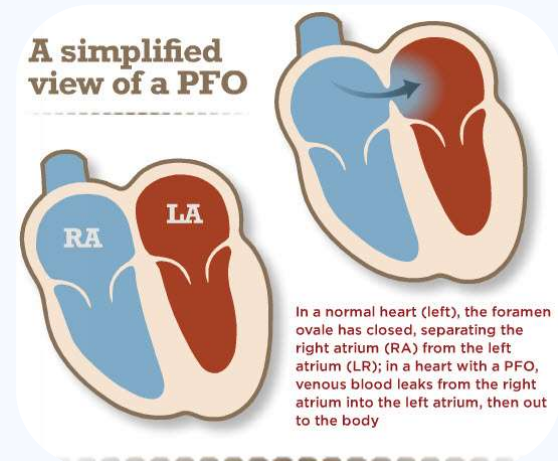
Extensive Polytrauma

Multiple **long bone fractures** increased FES risk
Pain management complexity in PSH diagnosis



Patent Foramen Ovale

Created **right-to-left shunt** for cerebral emboli
Explained cerebral FES without significant pulmonary involvement



Patent foramen ovale creating right-to-left shunt

Management Implications

- ▶ **Individualized dosing** of medications based on age and response
- ▶ **Careful titration** of propranolol to avoid bradycardia
- ▶ **Balanced approach** to pain control vs. PSH symptoms
- ▶ **Multidisciplinary care** involving neurology, orthopedics, and critical care

Discussion - Prevention Strategies

Fat Embolism Prevention



Early Immobilization

Traction of long bone fractures
Reduces fat release from marrow



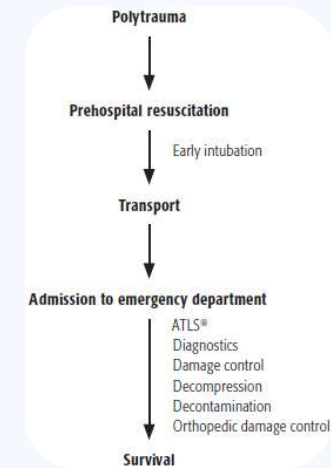
Prophylactic Corticosteroids

Controversial but may reduce incidence
Decreases inflammatory response



Timely Surgical Fixation

Early definitive care when stable
Prevents continued fat release



Polytrauma management protocol emphasizing early intervention

PSH Prevention



Early Recognition

High vigilance in at-risk patients



Adequate Pain Control

Proactive management reduces triggers

Discussion - Research Gaps

Key Knowledge Gaps



Pathophysiology

Limited understanding of **mechanisms** linking FES to PSH



Treatment Protocols

No **standardized guidelines** for FES or PSH management



Population Studies

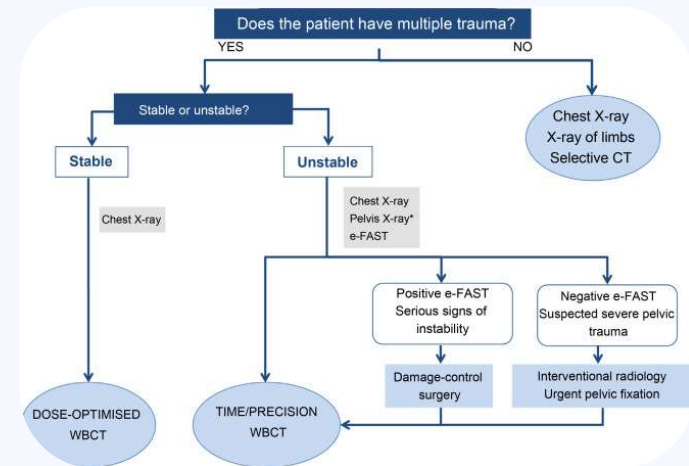
Paucity of data on PSH as complication of cerebral FES

12%

PFO in FES patients

Limited

Case reports available



Diagnostic flowchart for polytrauma patients

Future Research Directions

- ▶ **Prospective studies** on FES-PSH relationship
- ▶ **Randomized trials** of treatment modalities
- ▶ **Biomarker development** for early detection

Conclusion - Key Points

Case Highlights



Rare Complication

PSH in FES is an uncommon but potentially life-threatening complication



Diagnostic Tool Utility

PSH diagnostic tool enabled confirmation despite initial challenges



PFO Significance

Patent foramen ovale provided pathway for cerebral fat emboli

Critical Insight

Early recognition and targeted treatment of PSH in FES patients can significantly improve outcomes

Clinical Takeaways



Expedited diagnosis leads to better outcomes



Early immobilization prevents FES



Individualized treatment for PSH episodes



Multidisciplinary approach essential

Research Need

Further investigation required to establish standardized protocols for managing FES complicated by PSH

Case Outcome

Patient achieved **positive recovery** through timely diagnosis and appropriate management

Conclusion - Clinical Implications

Practice Impact



Early Recognition

High vigilance for PSH in FES patients improves outcomes



Diagnostic Tools

Standardized assessment enables timely intervention



Multidisciplinary Approach

Coordinated care essential for complex polytrauma cases

Clinical Takeaway

PSH should be considered in all FES patients with neurological changes, even when initial imaging is negative

Management Strategies



Continuous monitoring of vital signs



Proactive treatment with beta-blockers



Early fixation of long bone fractures



Team communication across specialties

Research Implications

Need for standardized protocols and prospective studies on FES-PSH relationship

Patient Outcomes

Timely diagnosis and appropriate management can lead to **positive recovery** even in severe cases

References

Key References

- 1** Baguley IJ, Perkes IE, Fernandez-Ortega JF, et al. Paroxysmal sympathetic hyperactivity after acquired brain injury: consensus on conceptual definition, nomenclature, and diagnostic criteria. [Journal of Neurotrauma](#). 2014;**31**(17):1515-1520.
- 2** Scarpino M, Lanzo G, Lolli F, Grippo A. From the diagnosis to the therapeutic management: cerebral fat embolism, a clinical challenge. [International Journal of General Medicine](#). 2019;**12**:39-48.
- 3** Mittal MK, Burrus TM, Campeau NG, et al. Pearls & oy-sters: good recovery following cerebral fat embolization with paroxysmal hyperactivity syndrome. [Neurology](#). 2013;**81**(14):e107-e109.
- 4** Godoy DA, Orquera J, Rabinstein AA. Paroxysmal sympathetic hyperactivity syndrome caused by fat embolism syndrome. [Revista Brasileira de Terapia Intensiva](#). 2018;**30**(2):237-243.
- 5** Vetrugno L, Bignami E, Deana C, et al. Cerebral fat embolism after traumatic bone fractures: a structured literature review and analysis of published case reports. [Scandinavian Journal of Trauma, Resuscitation and Emergency Medicine](#). 2021;**29**(1):47.

Note

Additional data regarding this case report can be made upon request to the authors

Questions & Answers



Q&A Session

We welcome your questions and discussion



PSH Diagnosis



FES Management



Treatment Options



Patient Outcomes

Thank You



Thank You

For your attention and participation



Early Recognition



Diagnostic Tools



Targeted Treatment

Contact Information



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For additional information about this case study, please contact [Dr. Lauren Gould](#)