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General Anesthesia: Pharmacological Principles, Mechanisms, Clinical Applications, Safety, and Recent Advances

¹Abhishek Saini, ¹Gulshan Kumawat, ¹Rahul Chulla, ¹Sanjay Parsawal, ¹Vikas Saini,
²Dr Pawan Kumar Basniwal

¹Scholar Sri Balaji College of Pharmacy, Rajasthan University of Health sciences Jaipur,
Rajasthan, India Mail: sbcpjaipur@gmail.com

²Principal and Professor, Sri Balaji College of Pharmacy, Rajasthan University of Health
sciences, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

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Abstract

General anesthesia is a controlled, reversible state of unconsciousness produced pharmacologically to facilitate surgical and diagnostic procedures while preventing awareness, pain, movement, and undesirable autonomic responses. Modern general anesthesia is usually achieved through a combination of intravenous and inhalational anesthetic agents, analgesics, neuromuscular blocking drugs, and supportive medications. The pharmacological basis of general anesthesia involves modulation of several molecular targets, particularly γ -aminobutyric acid type A (GABA_A), N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA), glycine, nicotinic acetylcholine, potassium, and other ion channels. Rather than acting through a single mechanism, anesthetic agents produce distinct components of the anesthetic state—including unconsciousness, amnesia, analgesia, and immobility—through actions at different sites within the central and peripheral nervous systems. Common intravenous agents include propofol, etomidate, ketamine, and barbiturates, whereas sevoflurane, desflurane, and isoflurane are important inhalational agents. Safe anesthesia requires appropriate preoperative assessment, airway management, cardiovascular and respiratory monitoring, temperature management, and postoperative surveillance. Recent advances include improved understanding of neural circuits, target-specific anesthetic development, pharmacokinetic-guided drug delivery, processed electroencephalographic monitoring, and development of rapidly metabolized “soft” anesthetic agents. This review summarizes the pharmacological principles, mechanisms, clinical applications, safety considerations, and emerging developments in general anesthesia.

Keywords: General anesthesia, propofol, sevoflurane, ketamine, GABA_A receptor, NMDA receptor, inhalational anesthetics, intravenous anesthetics, anesthetic monitoring, perioperative safety.

1. Introduction

General anesthesia is an essential component of modern surgical practice. It enables patients to undergo major and minor surgical procedures in a controlled state characterized by unconsciousness, amnesia, reduced or absent perception of pain, and lack of purposeful movement. The anesthetic state is not simply a state of sleep; it represents a pharmacologically induced alteration of consciousness and neural activity involving multiple brain regions and molecular pathways.

The development of modern anesthesia has transformed surgery by allowing increasingly complex procedures to be performed safely and with minimal patient discomfort. Contemporary anesthetic practice has evolved from the use of single agents to a multimodal or balanced approach, in which different drugs are combined to achieve hypnosis, analgesia, muscle relaxation, and control of physiological responses while minimizing adverse effects.

At the molecular level, general anesthetics interact with several neurotransmitter receptors and ion channels. GABA_A receptors are particularly important targets for many intravenous and inhalational anesthetics, while agents such as ketamine and nitrous oxide have important effects on NMDA-mediated excitatory neurotransmission. Importantly, general anesthesia does not have a single universal mechanism. Current evidence indicates that different components of anesthesia are produced through actions at multiple molecular and anatomical targets. These include cortical and subcortical neural networks, the hippocampus, thalamus, brainstem, and spinal cord.

2. Objectives of General Anesthesia

The principal objectives of general anesthesia are:

1. Hypnosis or unconsciousness – producing a reversible loss of awareness.
2. Amnesia – preventing recall of intraoperative events.
3. Analgesia – reducing or preventing perception of surgical pain.
4. Immobility – preventing purposeful movement during surgery.
5. Muscle relaxation – facilitating surgical exposure and airway management.
6. Control of autonomic responses – limiting undesirable cardiovascular and endocrine responses to surgical stimulation.
7. Maintenance of physiological stability – maintaining adequate oxygenation, ventilation, circulation, and temperature.

These objectives are often achieved by combining several classes of drugs rather than relying on one anesthetic agent.

3. Classification of General Anesthetic Agents

General anesthetic drugs can broadly be classified into intravenous and inhalational agents.

3.1 Intravenous anesthetic agents

Important intravenous agents include: Propofol, Etomidate, Ketamine, Thiopental, Methohexital, Midazolam and related sedative agents

3.2 Inhalational anesthetic agents

Important inhalational agents include: Sevoflurane, Desflurane, Isoflurane and Nitrous oxide

3.3 Adjunctive drugs

Anesthesia frequently requires additional medications such as: Opioid analgesics, Neuromuscular blocking agents, Benzodiazepines, Antiemetics, Anticholinergic drugs, Vasopressors and Reversal agents

The combination allows lower doses of individual agents and facilitates a more controlled anesthetic state.

4. Pharmacological Mechanisms of General Anesthesia

The molecular mechanisms of general anesthesia are complex. Earlier theories proposed that anesthetics acted primarily by dissolving nonspecifically into neuronal lipid membranes. Modern research has demonstrated that anesthetic effects are largely associated with interactions with specific proteins, receptors, ion channels, and neuronal circuits.

4.1 GABAergic mechanisms

The GABA_A receptor is one of the most important targets for many general anesthetics. GABA is the principal inhibitory neurotransmitter in the central nervous system. Activation of GABA_A receptors increases chloride conductance and suppresses neuronal excitability.

Propofol, etomidate, barbiturates, and several volatile anesthetics enhance GABA_A-mediated inhibitory neurotransmission.

Enhanced GABAergic transmission contributes to: Hypnosis, Amnesia, Sedation, Reduced neuronal excitability

However, GABA_A modulation alone cannot explain all aspects of general anesthesia.

4.2 NMDA receptor mechanisms

The NMDA receptor is an important excitatory glutamate receptor. Ketamine produces anesthesia predominantly through NMDA

receptor antagonism. Reduction of excitatory neurotransmission contributes to its dissociative anesthetic, analgesic, and amnesic properties.

Nitrous oxide also has important effects on NMDA-mediated neurotransmission and contributes substantially to analgesia.

4.3 Glycine receptors

Glycine is an inhibitory neurotransmitter, particularly important in the spinal cord and brainstem. Several inhalational anesthetics enhance glycinergic transmission. This contributes particularly to suppression of spinal motor responses and immobility.

4.4 Potassium channels

Volatile anesthetics can activate two-pore-domain potassium channels and other potassium conductances. Increased potassium conductance promotes neuronal hyperpolarization and decreases neuronal excitability.

4.5 Nicotinic acetylcholine receptors

General anesthetics can inhibit nicotinic acetylcholine receptors, thereby reducing excitatory neurotransmission. Neuromuscular blocking agents act primarily at nicotinic receptors at the neuromuscular junction and are therefore important adjuncts when profound muscle relaxation is required.

5. Major Intravenous General Anesthetics

5.1 Propofol

Propofol is one of the most widely used intravenous induction agents. It produces rapid unconsciousness and is characterized by relatively rapid redistribution and recovery after single or short-duration administration. Its principal pharmacological action involves enhancement of GABA_A receptor-mediated inhibition. Propofol also interacts with other molecular targets, demonstrating that its pharmacology is more complex than a single receptor mechanism.

Advantages : Rapid onset , Rapid recovery , Useful for induction and maintenance , Favorable recovery profile in many ambulatory procedures and Antiemetic properties

Adverse effects

Important adverse effects include: Hypotension , Respiratory depression ,Apnea ,Pain on injection ,Bradycardia in susceptible patients Dose-dependent cardiovascular and respiratory depression are among the major limitations of propofol.

5.2 Etomidate

Etomidate is a short-acting intravenous hypnotic agent with relatively limited

cardiovascular depression compared with several other induction drugs. It enhances GABA_A receptor activity and may be particularly useful when cardiovascular stability is an important consideration.

Advantages: Rapid onset, Short duration and relatively stable cardiovascular profile

Limitations: Myoclonus , Injection-site discomfort ,Nausea and vomiting and Adrenal steroidogenesis suppression following administration

5.3 Ketamine

Ketamine is a dissociative anesthetic with strong analgesic activity. Its principal mechanism involves NMDA receptor antagonism.

Unlike many conventional anesthetic agents, ketamine may produce sympathetic stimulation and generally preserves spontaneous respiration and airway reflexes better than many other induction agents, although significant airway and respiratory complications can still occur.

Clinical applications : Induction of anesthesia ,Procedural anesthesia ,Analgesia ,Emergency medicine and Selected patients with hemodynamic instability

Adverse effects : Emergence reactions, Increased secretions ,Nausea and vomiting ,Transient hypertension and tachycardia ,Increased intracranial and intraocular pressure in selected circumstances

5.4 Barbiturates

Thiopental and methohexital are ultrashort-acting barbiturates that enhance GABAergic inhibitory transmission. Their use has declined in many settings because of the availability of newer agents such as propofol. Barbiturates may cause dose-dependent respiratory and cardiovascular depression and have relatively less favorable recovery characteristics than propofol in many situations.

6. Inhalational Anesthetic Agents

6.1 Sevoflurane

Sevoflurane is a volatile anesthetic characterized by relatively rapid induction and recovery. It is particularly useful for inhalational induction because it is less irritating to the airway than some other volatile anesthetics.

Advantages: Smooth induction ,Relatively rapid recovery ,Useful in pediatric anesthesia ,Less airway irritation than desflurane

Adverse effects : Hypotension ,Respiratory depression ,Postoperative nausea and

vomiting ,Rare anesthetic-related complications such as malignant hyperthermia in susceptible individuals

6.2 Desflurane

Desflurane has low blood-gas solubility, resulting in relatively rapid changes in anesthetic depth and rapid recovery.

It may be useful when rapid emergence is desirable.

However, rapid increases in concentration can produce sympathetic stimulation, including tachycardia and hypertension. It can also irritate the airway.

6.3 Isoflurane

Isoflurane provides effective maintenance of general anesthesia but has relatively slower induction and recovery compared with sevoflurane and desflurane. It produces dose-dependent cardiovascular and respiratory depression and remains useful in selected surgical settings.

6.4 Nitrous Oxide

Nitrous oxide is an inhalational anesthetic gas with significant analgesic properties. Its anesthetic potency is relatively low, so it is frequently used as an adjunct rather than as the sole anesthetic.

Potential disadvantages include nausea, diffusion into closed gas spaces, and effects associated with prolonged or repeated exposure.

7. Balanced General Anesthesia

Modern anesthesia often uses a balanced anesthesia technique. Instead of administering a large dose of one anesthetic drug, several drugs with complementary pharmacological properties are combined.

8. Clinical Applications

General anesthesia is used for a wide range of surgical and diagnostic procedures.

Major applications include: Abdominal surgery ,Orthopedic surgery ,Cardiothoracic procedures ,Neurosurgery ,Major gynecological surgery ,Urological surgery ,ENT procedures ,Pediatric surgery ,Major trauma surgery ,Certain diagnostic and interventional procedures.

The choice of anesthetic technique depends on the procedure, expected duration, patient's age, comorbidities, airway characteristics, hemodynamic status, and postoperative requirements.

9. Stages of General Anesthesia

Traditionally, general anesthesia has been described in stages:

Stage I – Analgesia

The patient experiences progressive

analgesia and sedation while remaining conscious during the early part of this stage.

Stage II – Excitement

Loss of consciousness occurs, and irregular respiration, involuntary movements, and autonomic responses may occur.

Stage III – Surgical anesthesia

This is the desired stage for most surgical procedures. Progressive depression of reflexes and muscle tone occurs.

Stage IV – Medullary paralysis

This represents excessive anesthetic depth with severe depression of vital brainstem functions. It is an undesirable and potentially life-threatening state.

Modern anesthetic practice uses titrated drug administration and physiological monitoring rather than relying solely on these classical stages.

10. Safety and Monitoring

Patient safety is a central component of contemporary anesthesia. Before anesthesia, patients should undergo appropriate assessment of:

- Medical history
- Medication use
- Previous anesthetic complications
- Allergies
- Cardiovascular status
- Respiratory status
- Airway
- Fasting status
- Relevant laboratory investigations

During anesthesia, continuous assessment of oxygenation, ventilation, circulation, and anesthetic depth is essential.

Important monitoring parameters : Pulse oximetry , Non-invasive or invasive blood pressure ,Electrocardiography ,End-tidal carbon dioxide ,Respiratory rate ,Airway pressure ,Temperature, Neuromuscular function when indicated ,Processed EEG/depth monitoring in selected patients.

Monitoring helps clinicians identify hypoxemia, hypoventilation, hypotension, arrhythmias, excessive anesthetic depth, and other complications at an early stage.

11. Adverse Effects and Complications

Although modern general anesthesia is considerably safer than historical practices, complications can still occur.

Common complications : Nausea and vomiting ,Sore throat ,Dizziness ,Drowsiness ,Hypotension ,Shivering ,Postoperative pain and Delayed recovery

Serious complications : Difficult or failed

airway management, Severe hypoxemia, Aspiration, Cardiovascular instability, Anaphylaxis, Malignant hyperthermia, Severe respiratory depression, Awareness under anesthesia, Postoperative delirium or cognitive disturbances in susceptible patients. Risk varies according to the patient, surgical procedure, anesthetic technique, and perioperative circumstances.

12. Postoperative Recovery

Recovery begins with reduction or discontinuation of anesthetic administration and continues until the patient has regained adequate consciousness and physiological stability.

Important recovery parameters include: Adequate spontaneous breathing, Stable cardiovascular function, Appropriate oxygen saturation, Recovery of protective airway reflexes, Appropriate neuromuscular function, Adequate pain control, Control of nausea and vomiting, Appropriate level of consciousness.

Patients should remain under appropriate postoperative observation until recovery criteria are satisfied.

13. Recent Advances in General Anesthesia

13.1 Improved understanding of neural circuits

Recent research has moved beyond individual receptors toward understanding how anesthetic drugs affect neural circuits responsible for consciousness, memory, arousal, and motor control. Contemporary evidence indicates that anesthetic-induced unconsciousness involves coordinated changes in cortical and subcortical networks rather than a single anatomical site.

A 2026 review specifically highlighted ongoing research into the neural-circuit mechanisms involved during induction and emphasized that the precise mechanisms underlying induction remain incompletely understood.

13.2 Newer short-acting anesthetic agents

One important direction is the development of drugs with predictable onset and rapid metabolism. "Soft" anesthetic agents are designed to produce the desired pharmacological effect and then rapidly undergo metabolism to inactive compounds. Examples under investigation include remimazolam and newer ultrashort-acting etomidate analogues.

13.3 Target-specific drug development

Improved structural understanding of anesthetic binding sites has opened possibilities for developing drugs that selectively act on particular receptor subtypes. Such approaches may allow desired effects such as hypnosis and amnesia while reducing cardiovascular, respiratory, or postoperative adverse effects.

13.4 Computer-controlled drug delivery

Pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic models are increasingly used to guide intravenous drug administration. Target-controlled infusion systems can help clinicians achieve and maintain desired concentrations of certain intravenous anesthetics.

13.5 Improved depth-of-anesthesia monitoring

Processed electroencephalographic systems and other physiological indicators can assist in assessing anesthetic depth in selected patients. These technologies may help reduce unnecessarily deep anesthesia while supporting adequate hypnosis.

13.6 Multimodal anesthesia

Modern perioperative medicine increasingly emphasizes multimodal approaches combining hypnotics, analgesics, regional techniques, and non-opioid analgesic strategies. The objective is to achieve adequate anesthesia and analgesia while minimizing opioid exposure and other drug-related adverse effects.

14. Future Perspectives

The future of general anesthesia is likely to involve increasingly individualized drug selection and dosing. Pharmacogenomics, artificial intelligence, advanced monitoring, pharmacokinetic modeling, and improved understanding of neural circuits may facilitate patient-specific anesthesia.

Research is also focused on developing anesthetic agents with: Faster onset, Faster recovery, Greater cardiovascular stability, Less respiratory depression, Reduced postoperative nausea, Reduced neurocognitive effects, More selective molecular actions, Predictable metabolism.

A deeper understanding of the molecular targets and neural networks involved in anesthesia may ultimately permit more precise control of individual components such as unconsciousness, amnesia, analgesia, and immobility.

15. Conclusion

General anesthesia is a sophisticated pharmacological intervention involving multiple drugs, molecular targets, and neural

circuits. Its major clinical objectives are unconsciousness, amnesia, analgesia, immobility, muscle relaxation, and physiological stability. Modern anesthetic practice relies on combinations of intravenous and inhalational agents, opioids, neuromuscular blockers, and supportive medications.

GABA_A receptors remain central to the actions of many anesthetic drugs, while NMDA receptors, glycine receptors, nicotinic receptors, potassium channels, and other molecular targets contribute to different components of the anesthetic state.

Propofol, etomidate, ketamine, sevoflurane, desflurane, and isoflurane each have distinct pharmacological characteristics that allow anesthesiologists to individualize treatment. Appropriate preoperative assessment, airway management, continuous physiological monitoring, careful drug titration, and postoperative observation are essential for safe practice.

Recent advances have significantly expanded understanding of anesthetic mechanisms from simple receptor-level explanations to complex interactions involving molecular targets, ion channels, neural circuits, and consciousness networks. Continued development of short-acting drugs, targeted therapies, improved monitoring, computer-controlled administration, and personalized anesthesia may further improve efficacy and safety in the future.

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