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# Assessment and Management of Insensible Fluid Loss in Nursing Practice

**Boshra Hassan Bbakri (1), Salihah Hussain M. Domayan (1), Daifallah Zaid Alotaibi (2), Abdullah Fahad Al-Sahli (3), Mohammed Ali M. Almutairi (4), Sahar Ahmad Albishi (5), Nada Nazeh Almustafa (6), Saffanah Abdulrahman Almutair (6), Maliha Ahmad Aqeel Tomahy (6), Eman Ali Mohammed (6), Amal Obeid Alhoilan (6), Tahani Ali Jaboor (6), Maryam Mohammed Harthi (7)**

*(1) Specialized Dental Center – Jazan – Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,*
*(2) Al-Bajadiyah General Hospital – Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,*
*(3) Tumair General Hospital – Tumair, Saudi Arabia,*
*(4) Wutherlan General Hospital, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,*
*(5) PHCCA ATTEKA, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,*
*(6) Imam Abdulrahman Al Faisal Hospital Riyadh, Ministry of Health, Saudi Arabia,*
*(7) Imam Abdulrahman Al Faisal Hospital Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*

## Abstract

**Background:** Water constitutes about 60% of body weight and is vital for homeostasis, nutrient transport, and metabolic processes. Insensible fluid loss—water lost through skin, respiration, and minimal fecal excretion—accounts for 30–50% of daily water loss and is clinically significant, especially in perioperative and critical care settings.

**Aim:** To explore the physiological basis, clinical implications, and management strategies for insensible fluid loss in nursing and interprofessional practice.

**Methods:** A comprehensive review of fluid physiology, perioperative fluid management protocols, and evidence-based interventions was conducted, emphasizing the "4-2-1" rule for maintenance fluids and strategies for estimating insensible losses in high-risk patients.

**Results:** Insensible losses range from 400–800 mL/day in healthy adults but increase markedly with fever, burns, hyperventilation, or mechanical ventilation. Failure to account for these losses can lead to hypovolemia, impaired perfusion, and delayed recovery. Crystalloids remain first-line for fluid replacement, while colloids are reserved for specific indications such as severe hypoalbuminemia or burns. Advanced monitoring tools, including POCUS and hemodynamic devices, enhance accuracy in fluid assessment.

**Conclusion:** Effective management of insensible fluid loss requires proactive estimation, individualized fluid therapy, and interprofessional collaboration. Integrating bedside assessment, laboratory data, and dynamic monitoring ensures optimal fluid balance and patient outcomes.

**Keywords:** Insensible fluid loss, perioperative care, fluid management, crystalloids, colloids, nursing interventions, hemodynamic monitoring.

## Introduction

Water is a fundamental element for sustaining life, constituting the primary component of body fluid compartments and accounting for approximately 60% of total body weight. This proportion is influenced by several physiological and demographic factors, including gender, age, body composition, and levels of physical activity, with adiposity inversely affecting total body water content.[1] Within the body, water is distributed between intracellular compartments, which comprise roughly two-thirds of total body water, and extracellular compartments, accounting for the remaining one-third. Homeostasis of total body water is tightly regulated through complex mechanisms involving both thirst and hormonal responses. Reductions in plasma volume, increases in plasma osmolality, or declines in blood pressure stimulate the thirst mechanism, prompting fluid intake, while the release of the hormone vasopressin (antidiuretic hormone) modulates renal water reabsorption to maintain fluid balance. Hyperosmolality serves as a key stimulus for vasopressin secretion, ensuring that water retention occurs in response to physiologic needs. Water fulfills numerous critical physiological roles, including the transport of nutrients and oxygen, facilitation of metabolic processes, maintenance of cellular structure, and elimination of metabolic waste. Homeostatic water balance is achieved when daily intake is closely matched with output through various routes. Oral consumption of fluids and water-containing foods constitutes the primary source of water input, while loss occurs through urine, feces, perspiration, and less measurable avenues collectively



*Corresponding author e-mail: bbakri@moh.gov.sa (Boshra Hassan Bbakri).

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termed insensible fluid loss. Insensible fluid loss refers to the continuous, unquantifiable water loss through the skin, respiratory tract, and water contained in excreted feces. Estimates suggest that insensible losses in a healthy adult without significant comorbidities range from 400 to 800 mL per day, contributing to 30–50% of total daily water loss depending on individual fluid intake.[2] Given its substantial contribution to overall fluid balance, insensible water loss represents an essential factor in maintaining homeostasis and must be considered in clinical fluid management.

In perioperative and critical care settings, fluid management strategies are designed to maintain adequate intravascular volume, support cardiac preload, optimize tissue perfusion, preserve oxygen-carrying capacity, and maintain electrolyte equilibrium. Fluid replacement protocols aim to compensate for both sensible losses, such as urine and gastrointestinal output, and insensible losses, which are continuous and significant. Calculation of maintenance fluid requirements commonly utilizes the “4-2-1” rule, developed in the 1950s and widely adopted in pediatric and adult practice. According to this method, the initial 10 kilograms of body weight are allocated 4 mL/kg/h, the subsequent 10 kilograms receive 2 mL/kg/h, and each kilogram beyond 20 kilograms is allotted 1 mL/kg/h.[3] This formula provides a practical framework for estimating ongoing fluid needs based on patient size, although clinical judgment remains essential in its application, particularly in the context of surgical or critically ill patients. Preoperative fasting introduces an additional challenge to fluid homeostasis by producing a mild extracellular fluid deficit, while typically preserving intravascular volume. The degree of fluid deficit is proportionate to the duration of fasting and can be estimated by multiplying the standard maintenance rate by the length of the fast.[4] Intraoperative fluid replacement strategies are guided by the type and extent of the surgical procedure, anticipated blood loss, patient comorbidities, and hourly physiologic requirements. The aim is to restore and maintain adequate circulating volume to support perfusion while accounting for insensible and measurable losses. Failure to appropriately replace insensible losses may lead to hypovolemia, impaired tissue oxygenation, and hemodynamic instability, highlighting the critical nature of monitoring fluid balance in perioperative care.

| Source of water loss | Estimated water loss (ml per 100 kcal/day) |
|---|---|
| **Insensible** | |
| Skin | 30 |
| Respiratory | 15 |
| **Sensible** | |
| Stool | 10 |
| Minimal sweating | 10 |
| Urine | 50 |
| Total | 115 |

**Fig. 1:** Water loss.

Recognition of the role of insensible water loss is therefore essential in both routine and high-acuity clinical settings. While urine output and overt fluid losses are readily quantified, the continuous loss of water through the skin and respiratory tract requires estimation and proactive management. Insensible losses become particularly significant in conditions associated with increased evaporative loss, such as febrile states, hyperventilation, mechanical ventilation, or extensive burns. In these circumstances, underestimation of fluid requirements can exacerbate dehydration, compromise perfusion, and impair recovery. Consequently, understanding the physiologic basis, quantification, and clinical implications of insensible fluid loss forms a cornerstone of effective fluid management strategies, ensuring that water balance is maintained and patient outcomes are optimized throughout perioperative and critical care periods. In summary, water is a critical determinant of physiologic stability, distributed between intracellular and extracellular compartments and regulated by both thirst and hormonal control. Insensible fluid loss, although not readily measurable, constitutes a substantial proportion of daily water loss and must be considered in fluid replacement strategies. Accurate estimation of these losses, combined with calculated maintenance fluid administration and attention to preoperative fasting deficits, is central to perioperative and critical care management. Ensuring that both insensible and sensible fluid losses are adequately addressed allows clinicians to maintain homeostasis, prevent hypovolemia, and support optimal tissue perfusion in a wide range of clinical contexts.

**Issues of Concern**

Intravenous fluid therapy is a cornerstone of modern perioperative and critical care management, encompassing the administration of crystalloids, colloids, or combinations thereof to maintain hemodynamic stability, restore circulating volume, and preserve organ perfusion. The selection of an appropriate intravenous fluid requires a detailed understanding of the patient's physiologic needs, the nature of fluid loss, and potential complications associated with each type of solution. Crystalloids, which are aqueous solutions containing salts, with or without glucose, are typically the first-line choice for initial fluid resuscitation in most patients.[5] Their widespread use reflects both their safety profile and their efficacy in rapidly expanding the extracellular fluid compartment. Because crystalloids equilibrate quickly across the entire extracellular fluid space, the intravascular expansion achieved with a given volume is transient, necessitating careful monitoring and repeated administration in cases of ongoing losses. Crystalloid therapy must be tailored to the type of fluid deficit experienced by the patient. Losses predominantly comprising free water are typically managed with hypotonic solutions to restore osmotic balance, whereas losses that include both water and electrolytes—such as those occurring with hemorrhage or gastrointestinal fluid losses—require isotonic solutions to prevent shifts in plasma osmolality that could compromise cellular function.[6] The addition of glucose to crystalloid solutions can be indicated depending on the patient's metabolic requirements, for example, in cases of hypoglycemia or prolonged fasting. In operative settings, isotonic solutions, particularly normal saline and lactated Ringer's solution, are generally preferred because intraoperative fluid losses are largely isotonic and the maintenance of plasma osmolarity is critical for tissue perfusion and electrolyte stability.[7] Colloids represent an alternative fluid therapy, particularly in patients in whom crystalloids fail to achieve adequate intravascular volume expansion. Colloid solutions, such as albumin or synthetic starches, contain large molecules, typically proteins or glucose polymers, that remain primarily within the intravascular compartment due to their size and osmotic properties. These solutions exert a colloid osmotic effect, maintaining plasma oncotic pressure and supporting intravascular volume for a prolonged period compared to crystalloids. Despite these advantages, the use of colloids is limited by cost considerations and a higher potential for adverse effects, including coagulopathy, allergic reactions, and renal impairment, particularly with synthetic colloids.[6]

Clinical indications for colloid administration are generally specific. Patients with substantial intravascular fluid loss who do not respond adequately to crystalloid therapy may benefit from colloid resuscitation. Examples include individuals experiencing severe hemorrhage, patients with significant protein loss, such as those with extensive burns, or those with marked hypoalbuminemia that compromises plasma oncotic pressure. In these contexts, colloids provide both volume support and restoration of oncotic gradients, which are critical for maintaining intravascular volume and preventing edema formation.[8] However, routine use of colloids in patients without specific indications is not recommended, given their cost and risk profile. The choice of intravenous fluid is a complex clinical decision influenced by multiple patient-specific and procedural factors. Cardiovascular status is a primary consideration, as patients with compromised cardiac function require careful titration of fluid to avoid volume overload and subsequent heart failure. Volume status must be continuously assessed, taking into account ongoing losses, urine output, and hemodynamic parameters. Renal function is another critical factor, as impaired renal clearance may result in fluid retention and electrolyte imbalances. Similarly, the presence of comorbidities such as liver disease, heart failure, or electrolyte disorders necessitates careful selection and monitoring of fluid therapy. Serum osmolarity, electrolyte composition, and acid-base balance must also guide fluid administration to prevent iatrogenic complications such as hypernatremia, hyponatremia, or metabolic acidosis. Monitoring and titration are essential to ensure that fluid therapy achieves the desired clinical effect without introducing harm. While crystalloids are effective for initial resuscitation, excessive administration can lead to tissue edema, impaired oxygen diffusion, and increased postoperative complications. Colloids, though more efficient in intravascular volume expansion, require vigilance for potential adverse effects, and their administration should be accompanied by careful monitoring of renal function, coagulation parameters, and hemodynamic responses. The interplay of these factors highlights the importance of individualized fluid therapy based on patient physiology, operative conditions, and the nature of fluid deficits.

In conclusion, intravenous fluid therapy involves a careful balance between restoring and maintaining intravascular volume, compensating for fluid losses, and minimizing complications. Crystalloids remain the first-line choice for most patients due to their safety, efficacy, and low cost, whereas colloids are reserved for specific indications where prolonged intravascular volume support or restoration of oncotic pressure is required. The choice and administration of fluids must consider cardiovascular function, renal status, electrolyte and osmotic balance, comorbid conditions, and ongoing fluid losses. Continuous monitoring and an individualized, patient-centered approach are essential to optimize outcomes, prevent complications, and ensure safe perioperative and critical care fluid management.[5][6][7][8]

**Clinical Significance**

Evaluation of intravascular volume and overall fluid status is fundamental in clinical practice because direct measurement of fluid compartment volumes remains challenging. The human body distributes water between intracellular, interstitial, and intravascular compartments, each of which contributes to homeostasis, but none can be precisely quantified at the bedside. Therefore, clinicians rely on a combination of physical examination, laboratory investigations, and hemodynamic monitoring to assess intravascular volume and guide fluid replacement therapy. Accurate assessment is essential to prevent hypovolemia, fluid overload, and associated complications such as organ hypoperfusion, edema, and electrolyte imbalances.[9] Physical examination remains a cornerstone of intravascular volume assessment, particularly in evaluating a patient's baseline fluid status. Key indicators include the hydration of mucous membranes, skin turgor, the presence and intensity of peripheral pulses, resting heart rate, and blood pressure, including orthostatic changes. Urinary output also provides a practical measure of renal perfusion and fluid adequacy. Collectively, these findings allow clinicians to identify hypovolemia and assess the need for fluid resuscitation. However, in perioperative and critically ill patients, physiologic alterations induced by anesthesia, surgical stress, or systemic illness can compromise the reliability of these signs. For example, increased secretion of antidiuretic hormone (ADH) during stress may obscure traditional signs of dehydration or hypovolemia, making assessment more complex and requiring corroboration with laboratory or device-based measures.[9]

Insensible fluid loss represents a critical and often underappreciated component of daily fluid balance. It encompasses water loss through the respiratory tract, skin, and minimal fecal excretion that is not readily quantified. Insensible loss may increase significantly in specific clinical scenarios, such as major surgery, mechanical ventilation, fever, burns, or hypermetabolic states, and contributes substantially to fluid deficits if not anticipated. Clinically, patients with increased insensible losses may present with nonspecific signs such as dry mucous membranes, decreased skin turgor, delayed capillary refill, tachycardia, and dyspnea. These findings suggest a relative intravascular deficit, but they do not provide precise information about the cause or magnitude of fluid loss, emphasizing the need for adjunctive laboratory and imaging studies to determine the underlying etiology and guide appropriate intervention.[10] Laboratory assessments play a complementary role in evaluating fluid status. Serum electrolytes, hematocrit, hemoglobin, serum osmolality, and blood urea nitrogen to creatinine ratios can provide indirect evidence of fluid deficits or excesses. For example, hemoconcentration may indicate hypovolemia, whereas dilutional changes can reflect fluid overload. Additionally, point-of-care testing for lactate levels and arterial blood gases can offer insights into tissue perfusion and oxygen delivery, which are influenced by intravascular volume. Laboratory markers must, however, be interpreted within the context of the patient's overall clinical picture, as they are influenced by a range of pathophysiologic states. The emergence of hemodynamic monitoring has transformed the assessment of intravascular volume and fluid responsiveness. Invasive methods such as central venous pressure (CVP) monitoring, pulmonary artery catheterization, and arterial waveform analysis allow real-time assessment of cardiac preload, stroke volume, and systemic vascular resistance. These techniques enable clinicians to titrate fluid therapy with greater precision, particularly in patients with complex cardiovascular conditions, critical illness, or those undergoing major surgery. Noninvasive technologies have expanded these capabilities, including echocardiography, bioimpedance, bioreactance, and advanced pulse contour devices, which estimate cardiac output, stroke volume variation, and fluid responsiveness without requiring central access. These devices allow repeated, dynamic assessments and can reduce reliance on static measures such as CVP, which have limited predictive value for fluid responsiveness when used in isolation.

Fluid challenges remain a practical and widely applied clinical tool in evaluating intravascular volume. Administration of a measured bolus of isotonic fluid, followed by reassessment of vital signs, urine output, and hemodynamic parameters, allows clinicians to determine whether a patient is fluid responsive. A positive response—such as improved blood pressure, increased stroke volume, or enhanced urine output—indicates that intravascular volume expansion is beneficial, whereas a lack of response suggests that further fluid administration may be unnecessary or even harmful. In this context, fluid challenges can serve both diagnostic and therapeutic functions, particularly in patients with borderline volume status or ambiguous clinical findings. Perioperative fluid management highlights the importance of these principles. Surgical stress, anesthesia, and mechanical ventilation alter the normal balance between fluid compartments, often increasing insensible losses through evaporation from surgical sites and respiratory losses. Estimating these losses accurately and replacing them appropriately is essential to maintain tissue perfusion, prevent hypotension, and support postoperative recovery. Tailoring fluid therapy to account for both measured and insensible losses ensures that patients remain euvolemic while avoiding complications such as pulmonary edema or impaired wound healing. In addition to acute care settings, these principles extend to chronic conditions where fluid balance is disrupted. Patients with heart failure, chronic kidney disease, liver cirrhosis, or hypoalbuminemia require careful monitoring of both fluid intake and output to prevent intravascular depletion or fluid accumulation. Interdisciplinary collaboration among physicians, nurses, and allied health professionals is critical to optimize fluid management, interpret monitoring data accurately, and adjust therapy in response to dynamic changes in patient status. In conclusion, evaluating intravascular volume and overall fluid status is a complex, multifactorial process that integrates physical examination, laboratory investigations, and hemodynamic monitoring. Insensible fluid loss is a significant component that must be considered, particularly in perioperative, critically ill, or hypermetabolic patients. Laboratory and imaging studies provide essential adjuncts to clinical assessment, while invasive and noninvasive monitoring technologies allow real-time, dynamic evaluation of fluid responsiveness. Fluid challenges remain a practical tool to guide therapy, complementing other assessment modalities. Comprehensive, individualized assessment of fluid status is essential to ensure appropriate fluid replacement, prevent complications, and optimize patient outcomes across a range of clinical settings.[9][10]

**Nursing, Allied Health, and Interprofessional Team Interventions**

Assessment and management of fluid status represent a core competency in nursing, medical, and allied health education, forming the foundation for safe and effective care of critically ill and perioperative patients. Understanding the dynamics of total body water, intravascular volume, and insensible fluid loss is essential for all members of the healthcare team. In clinical practice, this knowledge directly informs interventions to maintain hemodynamic stability, optimize tissue perfusion, and prevent complications such as hypovolemia, fluid overload, or electrolyte disturbances. The complexity of fluid balance necessitates seamless communication and collaboration among nurses, physicians, physician assistants, dietitians, and other allied health professionals, as the clinical status of a patient can change rapidly and requires coordinated decision-making. Bedside nurses play a central role in ongoing fluid assessment and management. They continuously monitor vital signs, urine output, skin turgor, mucous membrane hydration, capillary refill, and other physical indicators of intravascular volume. In addition to direct observation, nurses document trends, recognize subtle deviations, and escalate concerns to other members of the healthcare team. Their observations often serve as the first indicators of fluid imbalance, enabling timely interventions. Because fluid shifts can occur rapidly, particularly in critically ill or perioperative patients, nurses' vigilance and rapid communication are essential for maintaining patient safety. Accurate handoffs and clear reporting are critical to ensure that fluid status information is interpreted correctly by physicians and other team members who make subsequent treatment decisions. Physicians, physician assistants, and advanced practice nurses increasingly utilize point-of-care ultrasound (POCUS) to enhance the accuracy of fluid assessment. Transthoracic echocardiography allows rapid evaluation of cardiac filling pressures, ventricular function, and volume status, while focused examination of the inferior vena cava provides indirect insight into intravascular volume. This noninvasive technology enables clinicians to detect hypovolemia or fluid overload more precisely than traditional static measures, such as central venous pressure or physical examination alone. By incorporating POCUS findings into clinical decision-making, healthcare teams can individualize fluid therapy, minimize unnecessary fluid administration, and identify patients at risk of hemodynamic instability. The integration of POCUS into routine bedside assessment represents a significant advance in the precision of fluid management and demonstrates the evolving role of technology in modern clinical practice [10].

Allied health professionals, including radiologists, play a supporting but increasingly influential role in fluid assessment. Imaging modalities, such as computed tomography (CT) scans or ultrasonography, can identify subtle causes of fluid imbalance, including occult bleeding, third-space losses, or inflammatory fluid shifts. Level I/II evidence supports the value of radiologists' interpretations in guiding the management of hypovolemia and other fluid-related disorders. These findings can complement bedside assessments and noninvasive monitoring, providing a comprehensive understanding of a patient's fluid status. Collaboration between radiology and the frontline care team ensures that critical information is shared in a timely manner, promoting proactive interventions. Interprofessional communication extends beyond assessment to include implementation and monitoring of therapeutic interventions. Fluid replacement strategies—whether crystalloid, colloid, or a combination—require precise calculation and careful titration based on ongoing clinical data. Nurses administer fluids, monitor patient responses, and document effects, while physicians or advanced practitioners adjust rates, composition, and type based on laboratory values, hemodynamic trends, and imaging findings. Dietitians may provide insight into fluid intake related to nutrition, particularly in patients with comorbid conditions such as renal failure or heart disease. Pharmacists contribute by assessing compatibility of intravenous fluids with medications and ensuring safe administration of adjunct therapies. This interprofessional approach ensures that fluid management is evidence-based, patient-centered, and responsive to real-time changes in clinical status. Education and ongoing professional development are vital for maintaining proficiency in fluid assessment and intervention. Simulation-based training allows nurses and other healthcare providers to practice recognizing and responding to fluid imbalances in controlled environments, reinforcing clinical reasoning and technical skills. In addition, workshops and interdisciplinary case conferences encourage knowledge exchange among team members, fostering a shared understanding of best practices for monitoring insensible losses, interpreting laboratory and imaging data, and responding to dynamic changes in fluid status [10].

The clinical significance of insensible fluid loss underscores the importance of interprofessional collaboration. Insensible losses, which include water lost through respiration, skin evaporation, and minor fecal excretion, can contribute significantly to overall fluid deficits, particularly in patients undergoing surgery, mechanical ventilation, or in hypermetabolic states. Recognizing these losses requires integration of physical assessment findings, laboratory data, and clinical judgment. Interprofessional strategies that combine bedside observation, POCUS evaluation, and imaging review enhance the ability to detect and manage insensible losses effectively. By sharing observations and recommendations in real time, the healthcare team can proactively adjust fluid therapy, optimizing perfusion and minimizing complications such as hypotension, renal injury, or delayed recovery. In conclusion, the assessment and management of fluid status represent a critical interprofessional responsibility. Nurses provide continuous bedside monitoring and documentation, physicians and advanced practitioners utilize advanced technologies such as POCUS for dynamic evaluation, radiologists contribute essential imaging insights, and allied health professionals support comprehensive patient care. Effective communication, shared decision-making, and evidence-based interventions are essential to manage both measurable and insensible fluid losses. As point-of-care technologies continue to evolve and integrate into routine practice, the healthcare team's ability to assess fluid status accurately, individualize therapy, and improve patient outcomes is expected to advance further, reinforcing the importance of a coordinated, multidisciplinary approach to fluid management in modern clinical care.[10]

**Conclusion:**

Insensible fluid loss represents a critical yet often underestimated component of daily water balance. Its impact becomes pronounced in perioperative and critical care settings, where surgical stress, anesthesia, and mechanical ventilation increase evaporative and respiratory losses. Failure to anticipate and replace these losses can result in hypovolemia, compromised tissue perfusion, and adverse postoperative outcomes. Optimal management requires a multifaceted approach: accurate estimation of maintenance requirements using established formulas, vigilant monitoring of physical signs, and integration of laboratory and hemodynamic data. While crystalloids remain the cornerstone of fluid therapy, colloids serve as adjuncts in cases of severe intravascular depletion or hypoalbuminemia. Advanced technologies such as point-of-care ultrasound and noninvasive cardiac output monitoring have enhanced precision in assessing volume status and guiding therapy. Interprofessional collaboration is essential, with nurses providing continuous bedside assessment, physicians tailoring fluid strategies, and allied health professionals contributing diagnostic insights. Education and simulation-based training further strengthen team competency in managing fluid balance. By recognizing the significance of insensible losses and implementing evidence-based interventions, healthcare teams can maintain homeostasis, prevent complications, and improve patient recovery across diverse clinical contexts.

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