

Optic neuritis

Demyelinating optic neuropathy and its pathology-based differential

Dr Abu Suraih Sakhri

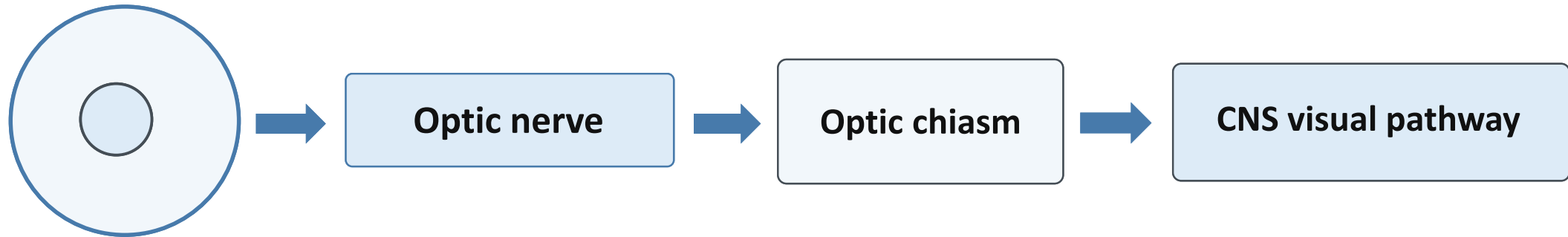
MBBS, MD (Pathology)

www.abusuraisakhri.com

Learning objectives

- Define optic neuritis precisely and identify the limits of the term.
- Relate myelin injury and axonal preservation to visual dysfunction and recovery.
- Explain associations with MS, AQP4-associated NMO and MOGAD.
- Distinguish demyelination from ischemia, papilledema, glaucoma and hereditary injury.

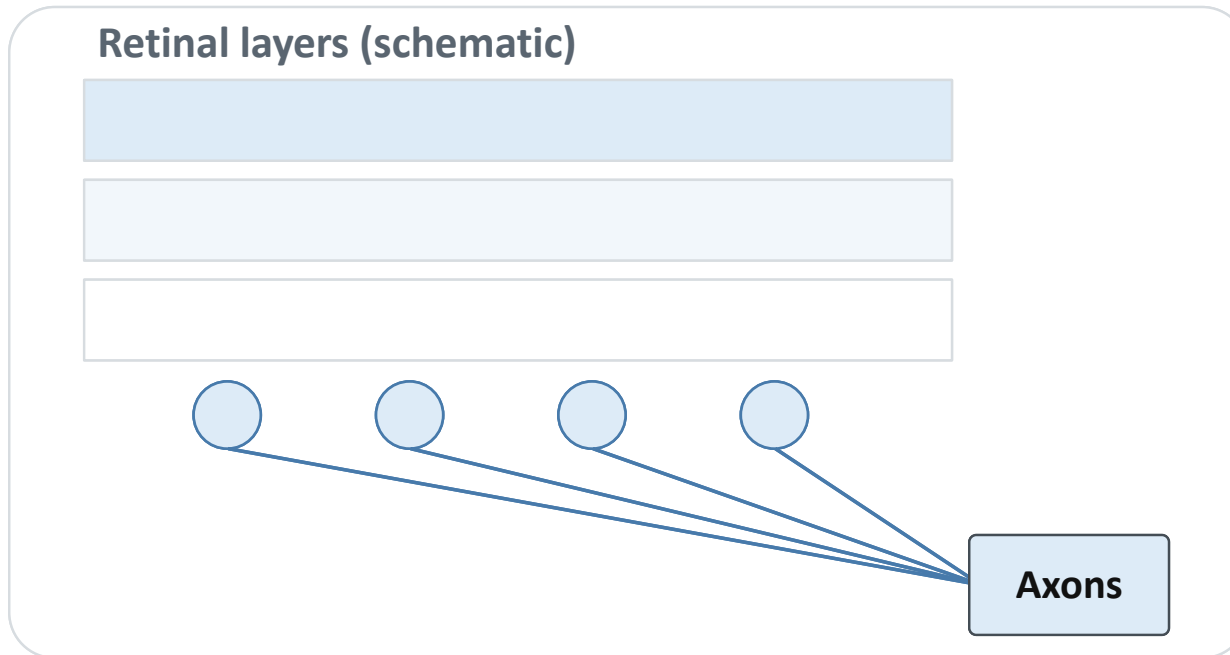
The optic nerve is a CNS tract



Retina

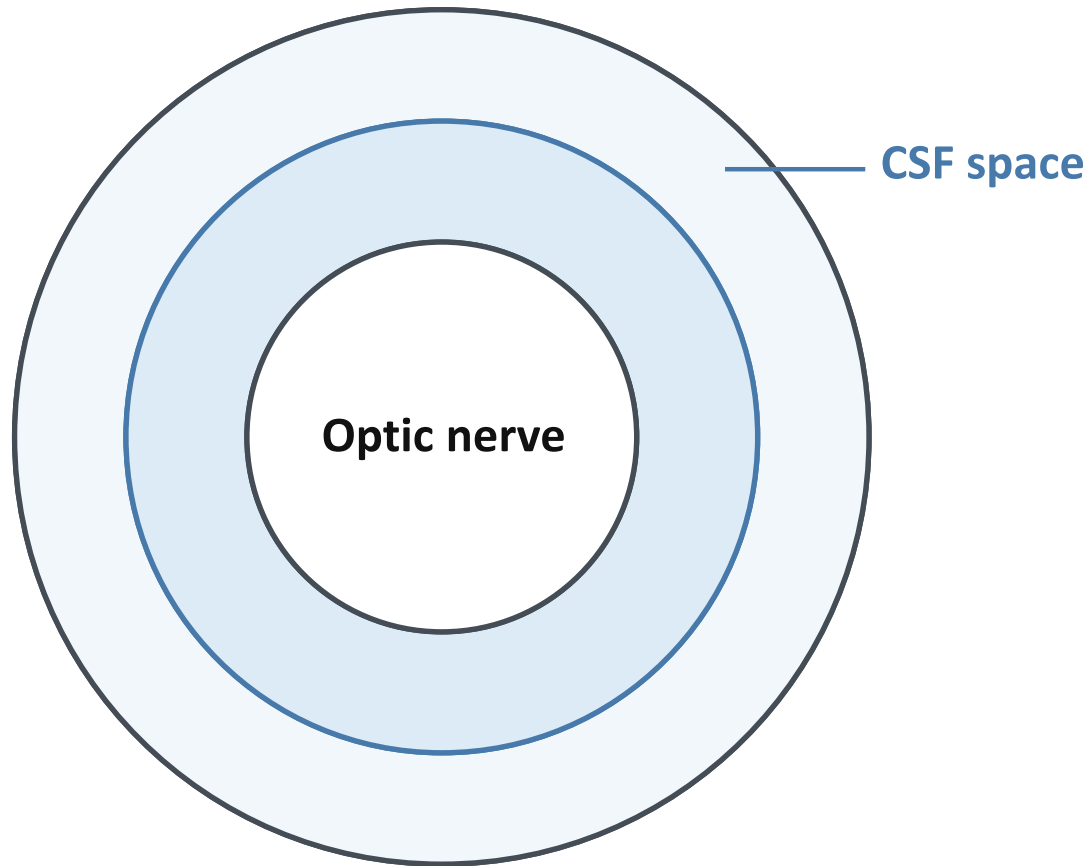
- The optic nerve is a sensory tract of the central nervous system.
- Its pathology has important parallels with diseases of the brain.
- MS plaques may occur in the optic nerve and chiasm.

Retinal ganglion-cell axons form the optic nerve



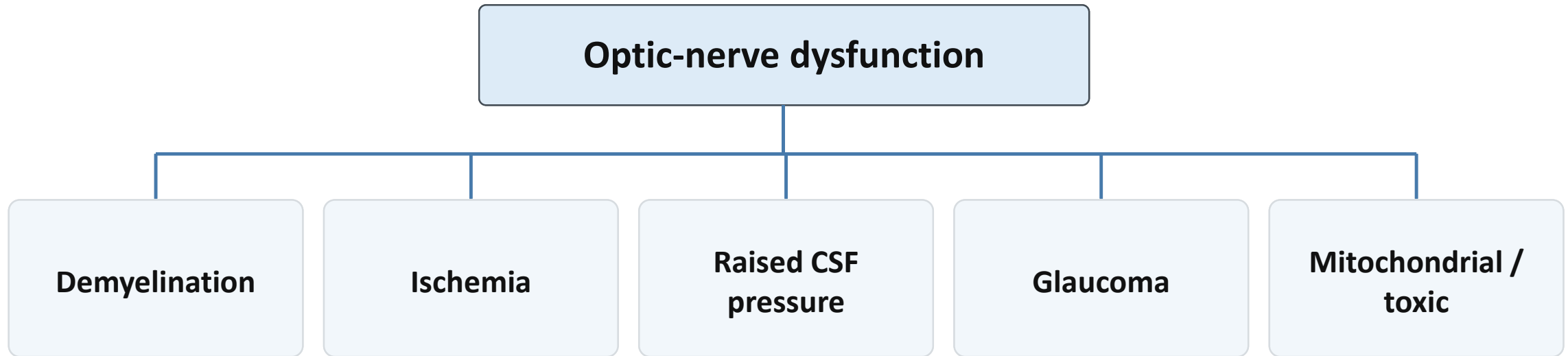
- Retinal ganglion-cell axons converge at the optic nerve head.
- Loss of those axons is an important structural manifestation of optic neuropathy.
- Damage may occur in the nerve itself or in the retinal ganglion-cell pathway.

Meninges and CSF surround the optic nerve



- The optic nerve retains a meningeal investment.
- Cerebrospinal fluid circulates within the surrounding space.
- Elevated CSF pressure can therefore affect the optic disc.

Optic neuropathy is broader than optic neuritis

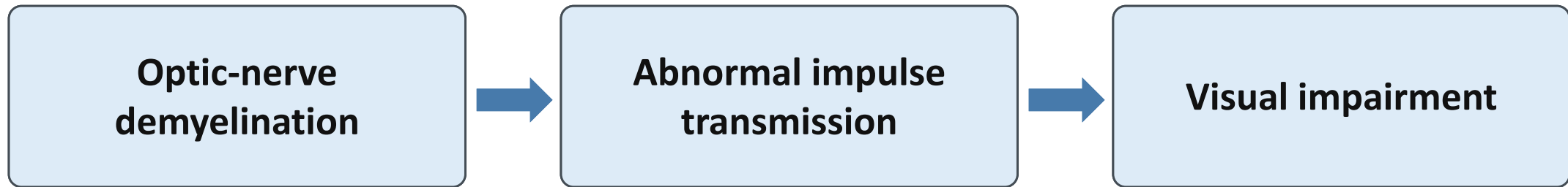


- Optic neuropathy denotes damage to the optic nerve, whatever the cause.
- The chapter describes vascular, pressure-related, glaucomatous, hereditary, nutritional and toxic mechanisms.
- Those causes must not be collapsed into a single inflammatory diagnosis.

“Optic neuritis” has a historically broad meaning

- Unrelated diseases have traditionally been grouped under this label.
- The word “neuritis” suggests inflammation, which may not describe every underlying lesion.
- An anatomically and mechanistically defined diagnosis is more informative.

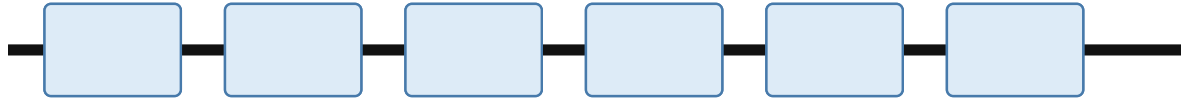
Robbins' operational definition



- In everyday clinical usage, optic neuritis is visual loss due to demyelination of the optic nerve.
- The definition identifies a lesion mechanism, not a single systemic cause.
- MS is one important association, but not every first attack predicts MS.

Demyelination and primary axonal injury differ

Intact myelin



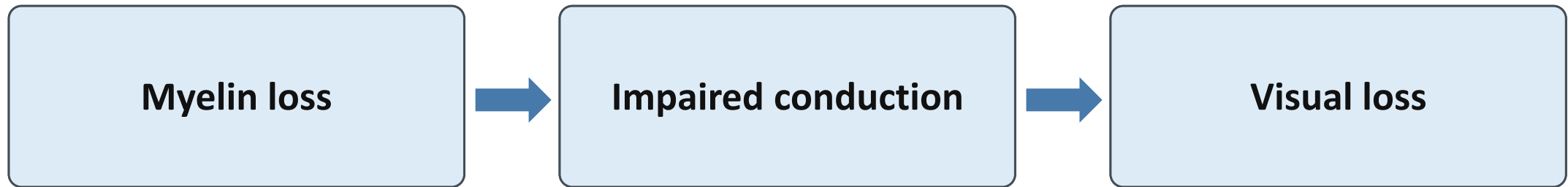
Myelin loss / incomplete repair



Editable conceptual axon schematic, not a micrograph

- Demyelinating disorders primarily damage myelin, initially with relative axonal preservation.
- The optic nerve can also undergo ischemic infarction or irreversible axonal loss.
- The dominant tissue compartment injured influences the prospects for recovery.

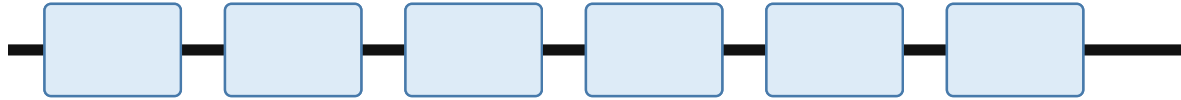
Why loss of myelin impairs vision



- Myelin supports efficient transmission of electrical impulses along CNS axons.
- Disruption of the sheath interferes with impulse propagation.
- Optic-nerve dysfunction is clinically expressed as impaired vision.

Myelin can be damaged while axons remain

Intact myelin



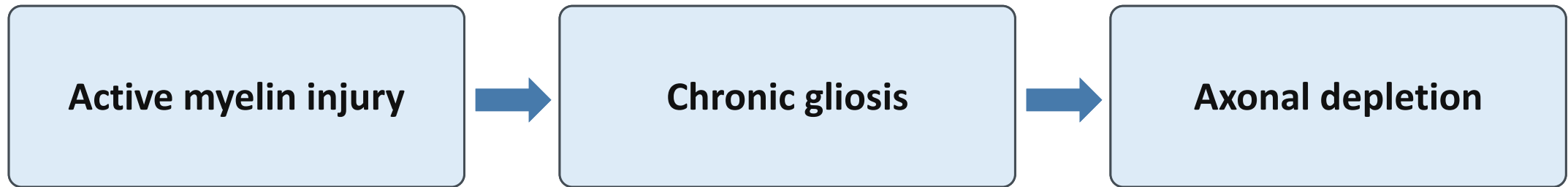
Myelin loss / incomplete repair



Editable conceptual axon schematic, not a micrograph

- Active MS plaques typically show marked myelin loss with relative axonal preservation.
- Axonal continuity may permit meaningful functional recovery.
- The histologic pattern is not synonymous with complete tissue regeneration.

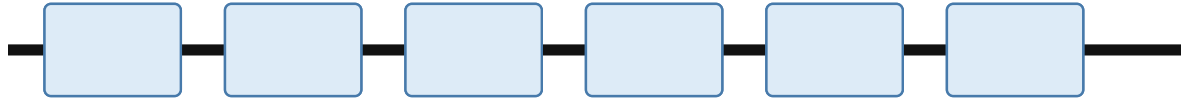
Secondary axonal injury changes prognosis



- Some demyelinating processes are followed by secondary loss of axons.
- Old gliotic MS plaques often show substantial axonal depletion.
- Neuronal loss limits restoration of function even when acute inflammation wanes.

Remyelination is limited in the CNS

Intact myelin



Myelin loss / incomplete repair



- CNS tissue has limited capacity to regenerate normal myelin.
- “Shadow plaques” may contain thin myelin sheaths consistent with incomplete remyelination.
- Residual unmyelinated axons can persist in otherwise inactive lesions.

Editable conceptual axon schematic, not a micrograph

An episode can resolve without systemic progression

Outcome after one attack

Visual recovery may occur

No further episodes in some

Follow-up is a separate question

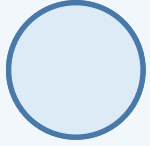
Systemic disease trajectory

MRI lesions alter later MS risk

Subsequent events may establish MS

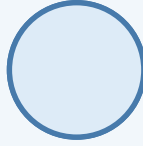
No automatic conversion

MS is a major cause of demyelinating optic neuritis



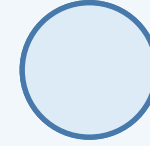
Optic nerve

Visual impairment



Brainstem

Cranial-nerve signs

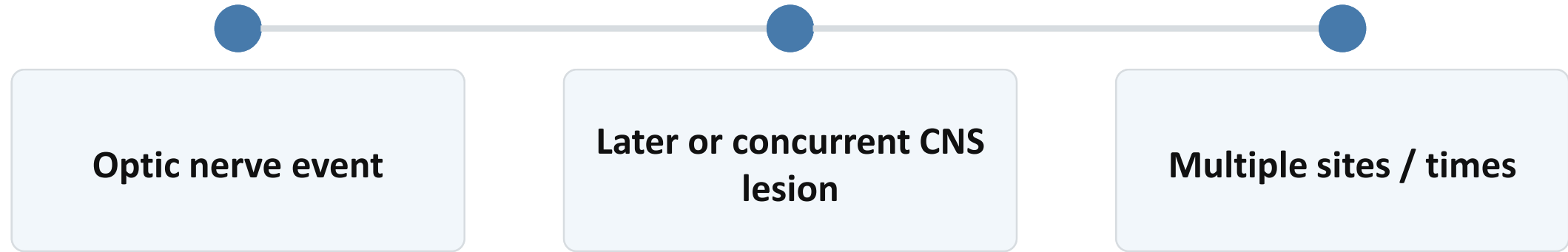


Spinal cord

Motor / sensory / sphincter

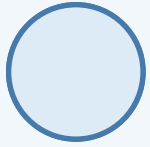
- MS is an autoimmune CNS demyelinating disease.
- The optic nerves and chiasm are among recognized sites of plaques.
- Optic neuritis may precede other manifestations of MS.

MS lesions are separated in space and time



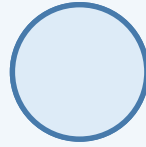
- Robbins characterizes MS by distinct neurologic episodes separated in time.
- Lesions are distributed at different sites within the CNS.
- An isolated optic-nerve episode does not, by itself, demonstrate this pattern.

Optic neuritis is often the initial MS manifestation



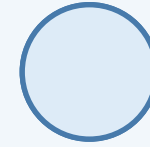
Optic nerve

Visual impairment



Brainstem

Cranial-nerve signs



Spinal cord

Motor / sensory / sphincter

- Unilateral visual impairment due to optic nerve involvement is a frequent first manifestation.
- Brainstem and spinal cord involvement can produce different neurologic deficits.
- A subsequent clinical course may reveal dissemination beyond the optic nerve.

A first optic neuritis episode is not an MS diagnosis

- Only a proportion of people with optic neuritis subsequently develop MS.
- Population-dependent progression estimates; They are not uniform individual risks.
- A diagnosis requires attention to the subsequent clinical and CNS lesion pattern.

Brain MRI modifies later MS risk

No brain lesions detected

Lower relative MS risk

Brain lesions detected

Higher relative MS risk

Association, not certainty

- After a first optic neuritis episode, concomitant brain lesions on MRI predict greater 10-year MS risk.
- MRI is a risk-stratification marker, not a deterministic prognosis.
- The source excerpt provides no patient-specific numerical risk estimate.

Interpret an MRI result as prognostic evidence

Brain lesions detected

Higher relative later MS risk

Evidence of wider CNS involvement

Not an automatic final diagnosis

No brain lesions detected

Lower relative risk than lesion-positive MRI

Single attack may remain isolated

Not a guarantee of zero risk

The 10-year risk statement has limits

- Lesion-positive MRI as a higher-risk state.
- The size of risk depends on the population and study context.
- Avoid transferring a cohort estimate directly to an individual without context.

Visual recovery and conversion risk are separate

Attack-level outcome

Recovery of vision

Residual deficit possible

Depends on tissue injury

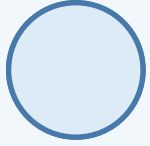
Disease-level outcome

Additional MS activity may occur

Baseline brain lesions alter risk

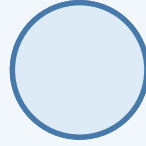
Remains uncertain after one event

Why location drives the clinical syndrome in MS



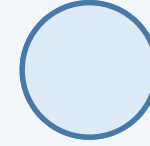
Optic nerve

Visual impairment



Brainstem

Cranial-nerve signs



Spinal cord

Motor / sensory / sphincter

- Optic-nerve lesions affect visual function.
- Brainstem involvement may produce cranial nerve and ocular-motor signs.
- Spinal cord lesions may cause motor, sensory and sphincter dysfunction.

Relapsing–remitting MS: Attacks and recovery



- Most people with MS initially experience variable relapsing and remitting episodes.
- Deficits may be followed by gradual, often incomplete recovery.
- An optic neuritis attack fits this wider relapsing CNS phenotype.

MS may progress beyond relapses

Relapsing phase

Discrete inflammatory events

Periods of partial recovery

Treatment targets relapse prevention

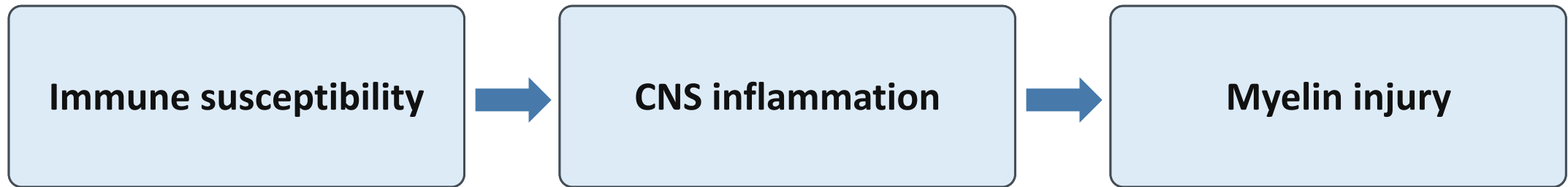
Progressive phase

Ongoing neurologic deterioration

Chronic tissue injury contributes

Not reducible to attack count

MS pathogenesis involves immune responses



- The precise initiating self-antigen remains unresolved.
- Genetic and environmental factors contribute to susceptibility.
- Multiple inflammatory pathways can damage CNS myelin.

B cells have a major role in MS

Autoantibodies

May bind glial antigens

Antigen presentation

Supports T-cell responses

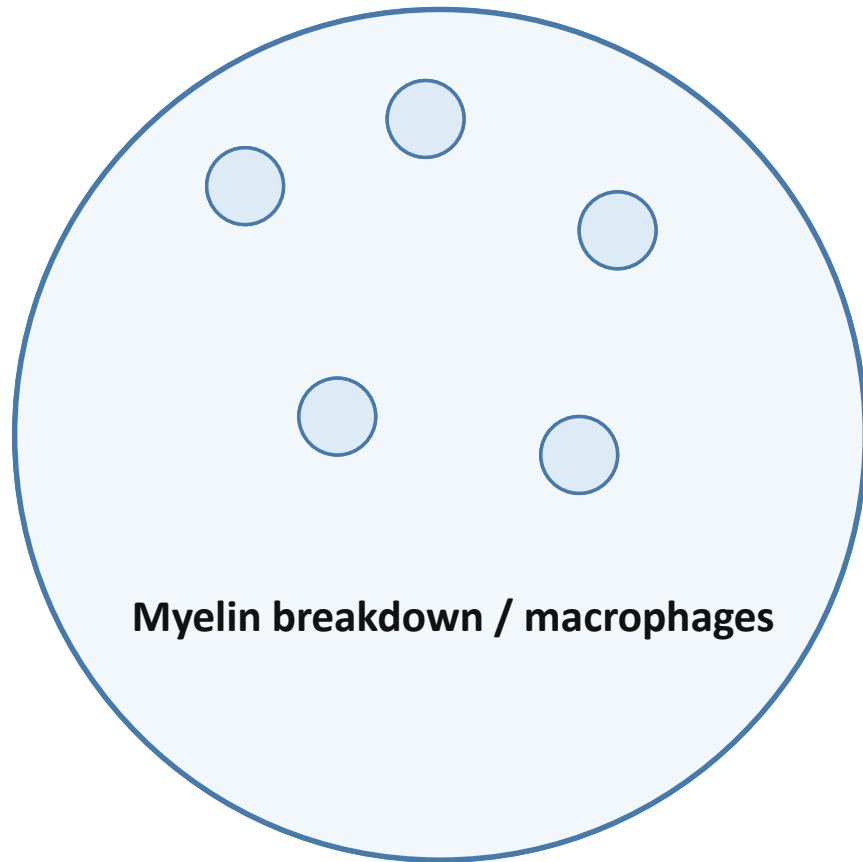
Cytokines

Amplify inflammation

Clonal expansion

CSF immunologic footprint

MS pathology: The active demyelinating plaque

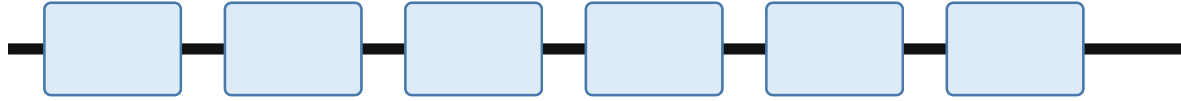


Schematic lesion, not pathology evidence

- Active lesions contain myelin breakdown and abundant foamy macrophages.
- Perivascular lymphocytes, often near lesion margins, accompany inflammation.
- The inflammatory lesion is primarily a pathologic model for MS-related demyelination.

Active plaque: Axons are relatively preserved

Intact myelin



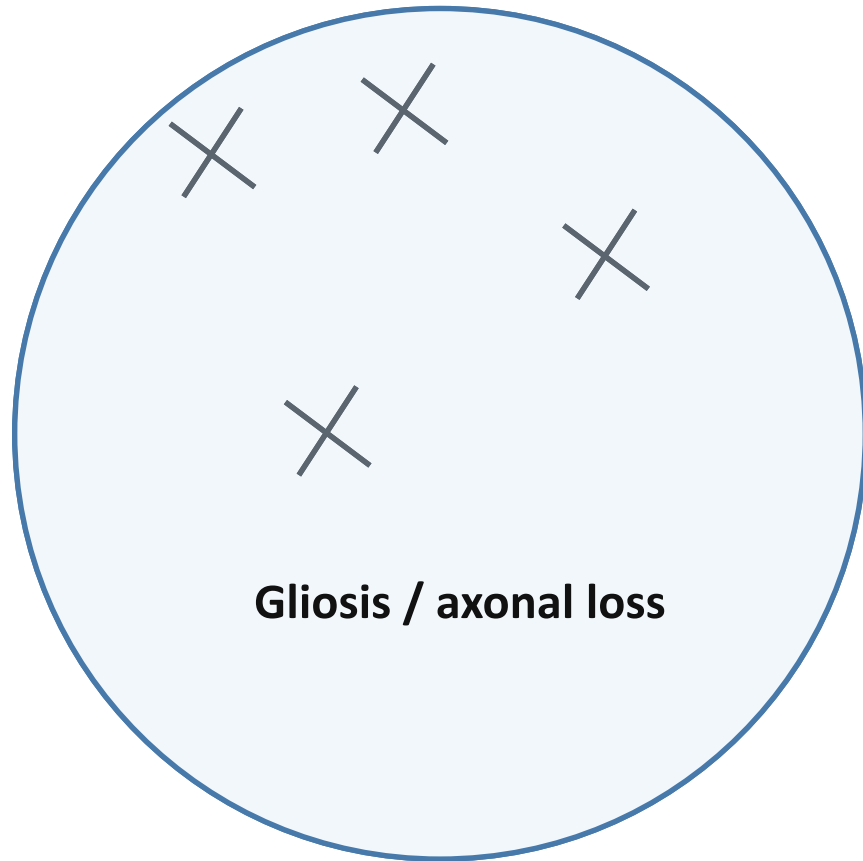
Myelin loss / incomplete repair



- Myelin can be nearly absent in the active lesion.
- Axons initially remain much better preserved than myelin.
- This distinction helps explain why a transient clinical deficit need not equal total axonal destruction.

Editable conceptual axon schematic, not a micrograph

Inactive plaque: Gliosis and axonal attrition

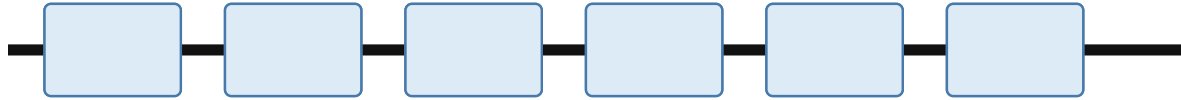


Schematic lesion, not pathology evidence

- Macrophages and overt inflammation become sparse.
- Reactive astrocytic gliosis becomes prominent.
- Old plaques can show markedly decreased axon density.

“Shadow plaques” suggest incomplete repair

Intact myelin



Myelin loss / incomplete repair



- Some plaques show reduced pallor and thinner myelin sheaths.
- These represent limited remyelination rather than full restoration.
- Partially repaired regions may coexist with persistent tissue injury.

Editable conceptual axon schematic, not a micrograph

Stages of an MS demyelinating lesion



- Early injury emphasizes myelin loss and inflammatory cells.
- Over time, inflammatory infiltrates may recede while gliosis persists.
- Partial remyelination is possible but often incomplete.

CSF findings support the MS context



- CSF IgG is often increased; Oligoclonal IgG bands are commonly observed.
- The bands reflect an expanded CNS B-cell response.
- CSF studies supplement—not replace—clinical and MRI interpretation.

MRI is central to assessing demyelinating disease

No brain lesions detected

Lower relative MS risk

Brain lesions detected

Higher relative MS risk

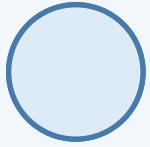
Association, not certainty

- Brain MRI can demonstrate lesions accompanying an initial optic neuritis event.
- MRI in monitoring the course of MS.
- MRI findings must be linked to the optic neuritis clinical setting.

Therapy in MS addresses systemic disease activity

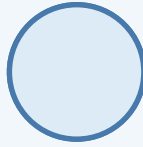
- Immunomodulatory and immunosuppressive treatment.
- B-cell–depleting anti-CD20 therapy is highlighted for relapse control.
- Controlling relapses does not completely eliminate late neurodegenerative progression.

Neuromyelitis optica links optic nerves and spinal cord



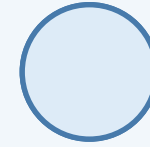
Optic nerve

Visual impairment



Brainstem

Cranial-nerve signs

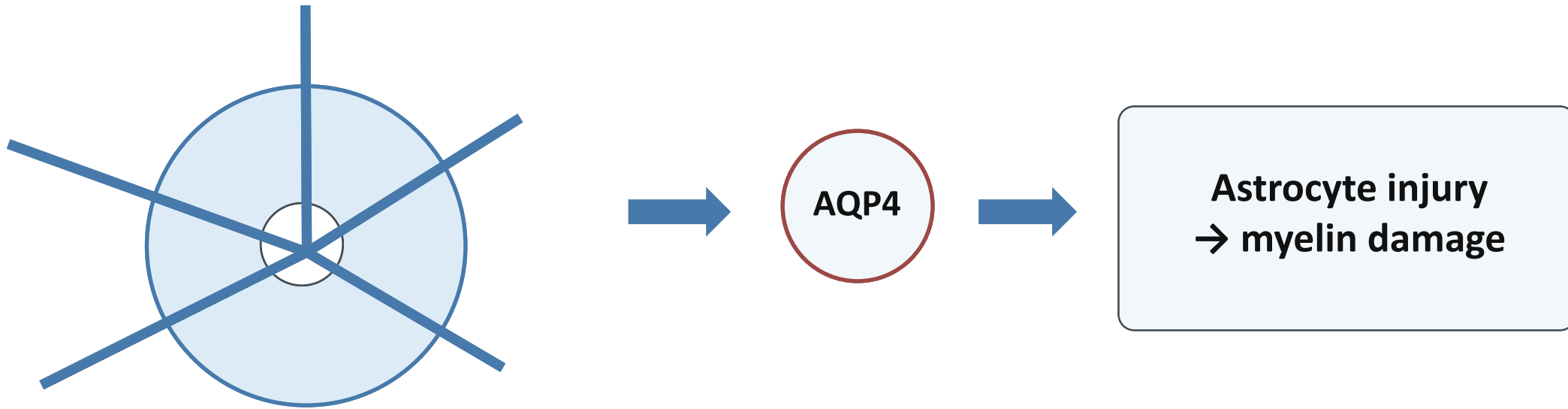


Spinal cord

Motor / sensory / sphincter

- The source describes a syndrome with synchronous or nearly synchronous bilateral optic neuritis and spinal cord demyelination.
- Recovery after the initial attack is often poorer than in MS.
- Its immunopathologic substrate differs from typical MS.

AQP4 antibodies identify an astrocyte-targeted disease



Astrocyte (schematic)

- Most NMO cases have pathogenic anti-aquaporin-4 antibodies.
- Aquaporin-4 is a major astrocytic water channel.
- The primary target is the astrocyte; Demyelination occurs downstream.

AQP4 injury can precede myelin destruction



- Antibodies damage astrocytes and the blood–brain barrier.
- The resulting astrocytopathy initiates inflammatory tissue injury.
- Myelin damage is secondary in this mechanistic model.

Complement contributes to AQP4-associated injury



- Damaged white matter can show vascular immunoglobulin and complement deposition.
- Neutrophils and eosinophils may accompany the inflammatory infiltrate.
- This tissue pattern separates AQP4-associated disease from a generic myelin-only model.

NMO tissue changes can be destructive

Necrosis

Destructive white-matter injury

Inflammation

Including neutrophils / eosinophils

Immune deposits

Vascular Ig and complement

AQP4 loss

Astrocyte-targeted pattern

MOGAD is not equivalent to AQP4-associated NMO

AQP4-associated disease

Antibody target: Astrocytic AQP4

Primary astrocytopathy

Female predominance described

MOG-associated disease

Antibody target: MOG

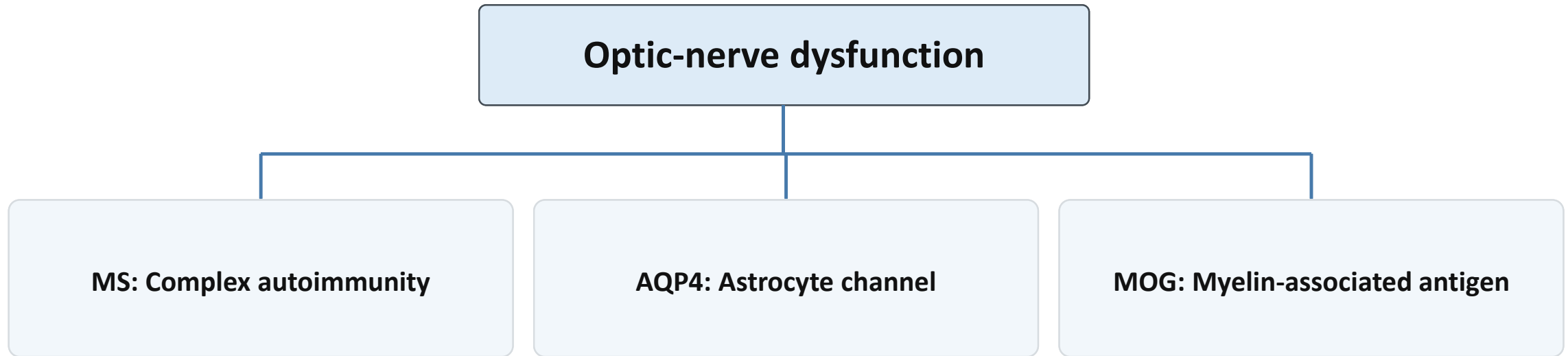
Different immune target

No female predominance in source

MOGAD has a distinct natural-history context

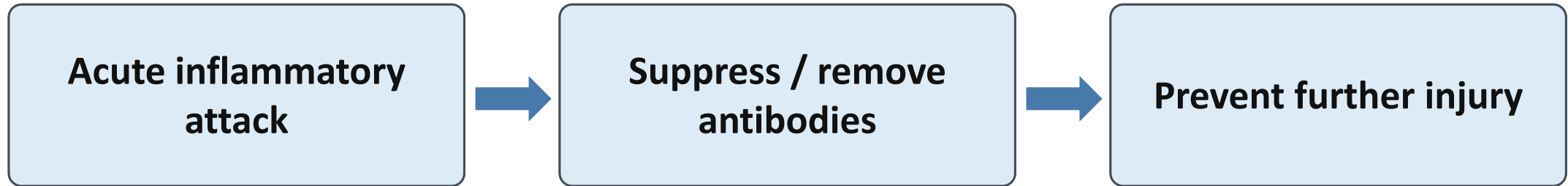
- The chapter describes MOGAD as more likely to be monophasic than AQP4-NMO.
- It may present with acute disseminated encephalomyelitis.
- The chapter highlights a predilection for children and young adults in that presentation.

Antibody target changes the pathogenetic model



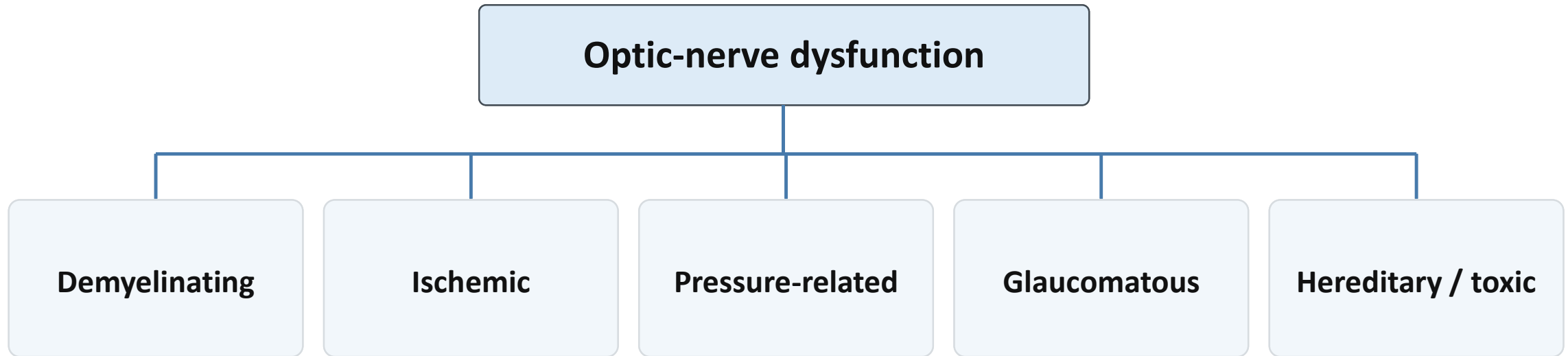
- AQP4-associated disease begins with an astrocytic antigen.
- MOGAD is associated with an antibody directed against a myelin protein.
- Both may enter the differential of optic-neuritis-associated demyelination.

Treatment concepts in AQP4-associated NMO



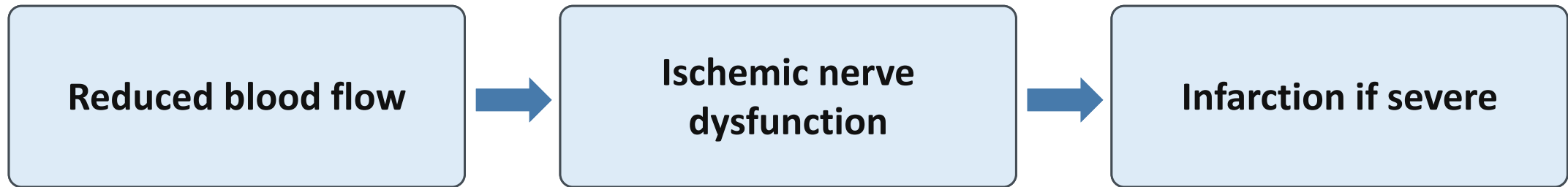
- Glucocorticoids or plasma exchange for acute attacks.
- Long-term strategies reduce pathogenic antibodies or inhibit complement.
- These are systemic-disease principles; This deck provides no drug doses or protocol.

Not all optic neuropathy reflects demyelination



- The shared clinical endpoint is impaired visual function.
- Other mechanisms include interrupted perfusion, altered CSF pressure and axonal degeneration.
- Mechanistic classification prevents misleading use of the optic-neuritis label.

AION: Ischemia is the initiating lesion



- Anterior ischemic optic neuropathy spans transient ischemia through infarction.
- Partial interruption of blood supply may produce transient visual loss.
- Sustained severe vascular compromise can permanently injure the nerve.

Incomplete ischemia and infarction differ

Viable ischemic zone

Reduced perfusion

Potential functional recovery

Injury may be transient

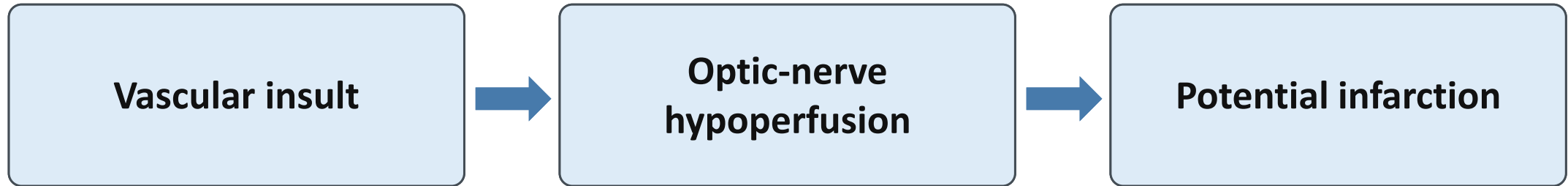
Infarcted nerve tissue

Irreversible tissue injury

No regeneration

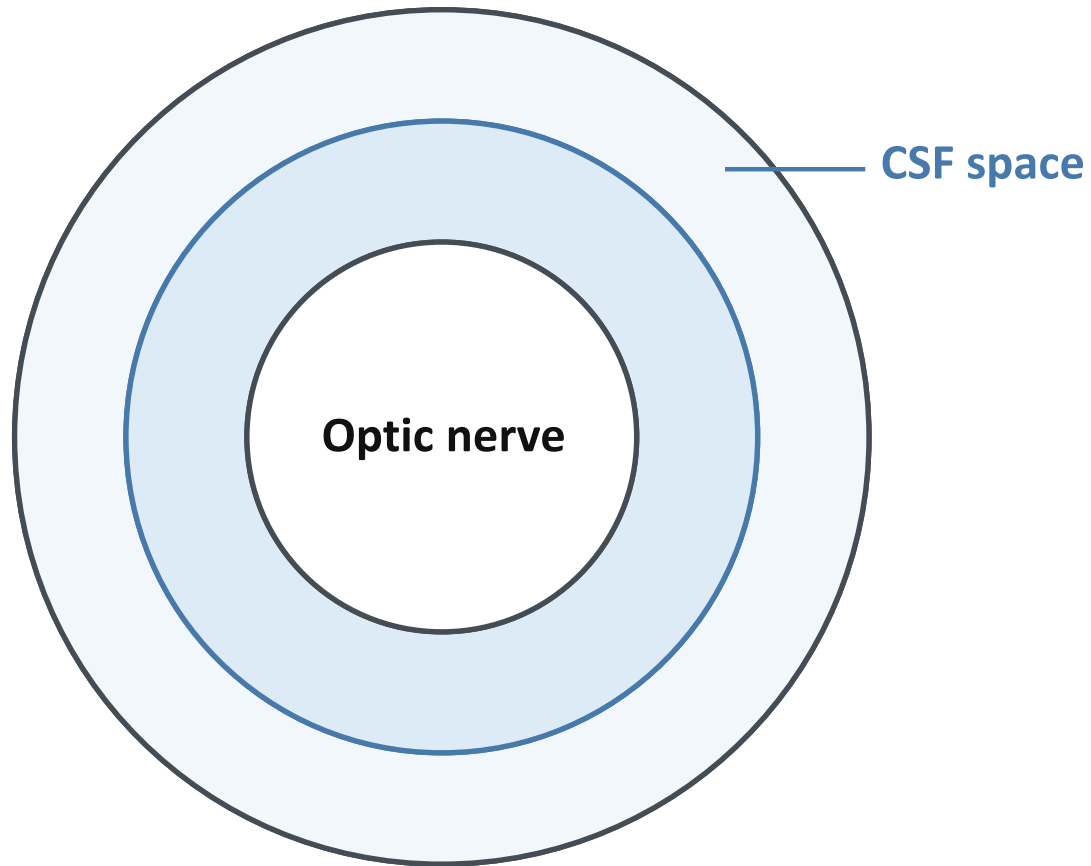
Permanent visual deficit

AION can reflect vascular inflammation



- Inflammation of feeding vessels can reduce optic-nerve blood flow.
- Thrombotic or embolic events are other described mechanisms.
- Temporal arteritis is an urgent cause because bilateral optic-nerve infarcts and blindness can occur.

Papilledema: Pressure affects axoplasmic transport



- Increased CSF pressure can compress the optic nerve circumferentially.
- Venous stasis and impaired axoplasmic transport produce optic-nerve-head edema.
- Raised pressure classically causes bilateral disc swelling.

Papilledema and visual loss are not synonymous

Papilledema from raised CSF pressure

Usually bilateral disc edema

Acute vision commonly preserved

Swelling from venous / axoplasmic stasis

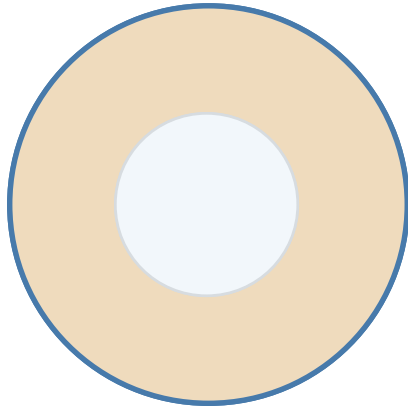
Demyelinating optic neuritis

Visual impairment from myelin injury

Need not share same disc mechanism

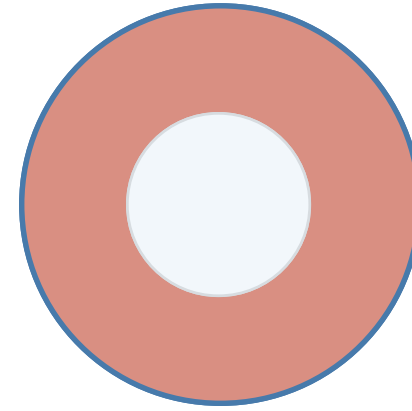
Systemic demyelination may coexist

Pale versus hyperemic swelling: A pathology clue



AION

Pale swollen disc



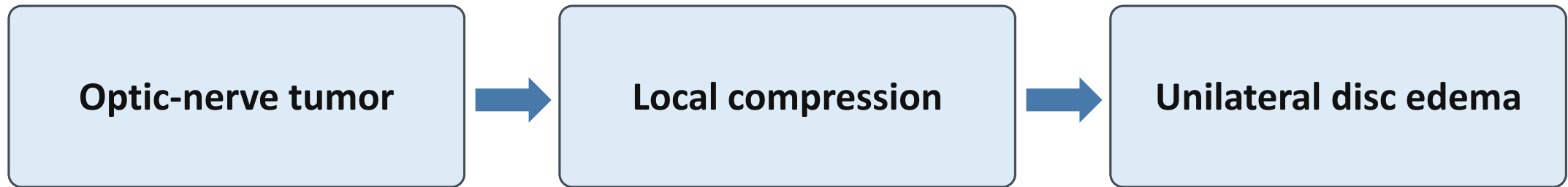
Papilledema

Hyperemic swollen disc

Color-coded diagram is schematic—not a fundus photograph

- In acute AION, the swollen optic nerve head is relatively pale due to diminished perfusion.
- In papilledema, the swollen disc is typically hyperemic.
- The comparison is a conceptual clue—not an exhaustive bedside algorithm.

Compression may also produce disc edema

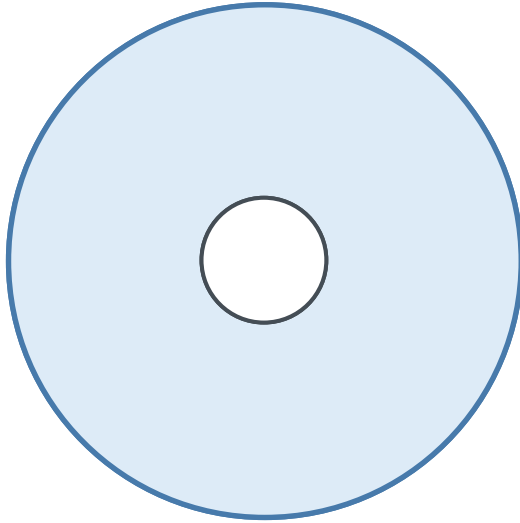


- A primary optic-nerve mass may cause unilateral nerve-head swelling.
- The chapter lists glioma and meningioma as principal optic-nerve neoplasms.
- Laterality and anatomical context can redirect the differential.

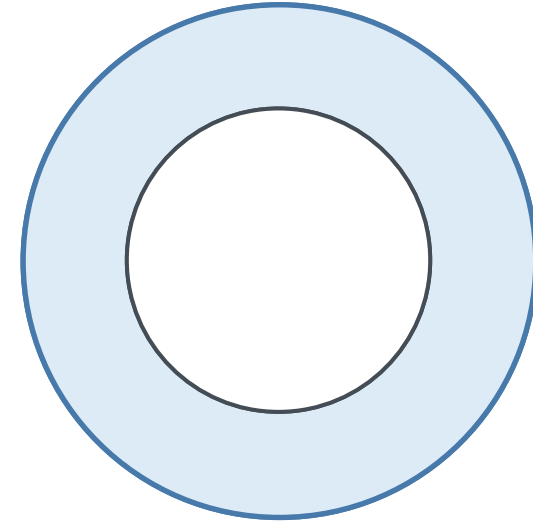
Glaucoma causes chronic ganglion-cell loss

- Glaucoma may damage optic-nerve axons through a pressure-dependent pathway.
- Individual susceptibility varies; Some injury occurs despite normal pressure.
- The result is a chronic optic neuropathy, not the demyelination discussed in optic neuritis.

Advanced glaucoma combines atrophy and cupping



Normal disc: Small cup



Advanced glaucoma: Enlarged cup

- Retinal ganglion cells and retinal nerve fiber layer become depleted.
- The optic nerve head cup enlarges and deepens.
- This combination of cupping and atrophy is characteristic of advanced glaucoma.

OCT demonstrates structural loss in glaucoma

Glaucomatous pathology

Ganglion-cell depletion

Nerve fiber layer thinning

Optic-disc cupping

Demyelinating pathology

Loss of optic-nerve myelin

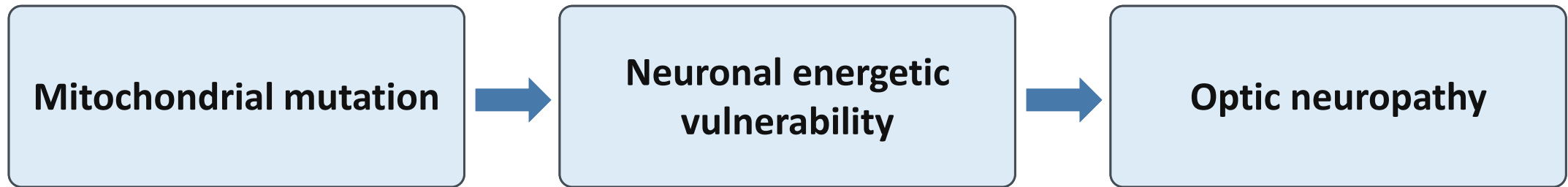
Initially relative axonal preservation

Variable later axon damage

Toxic and nutritional optic neuropathies

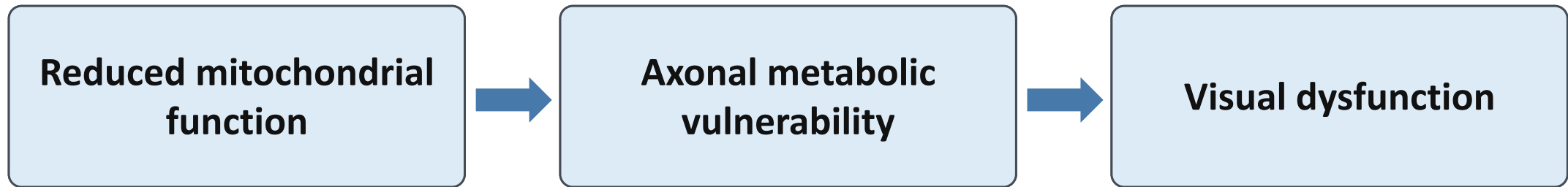
- Nutritional deficiency and toxins, including methanol, can cause optic-nerve injury.
- Central visual acuity is particularly compromised if macular-origin fibers are affected.
- A toxic or metabolic history changes the disease mechanism under consideration.

Leber hereditary optic neuropathy: Mitochondrial



- Leber hereditary optic neuropathy involves mitochondrial DNA mutations.
- Maternal inheritance reflects mitochondrial transmission.
- The chapter describes a male predominance and usual onset between ages 10 and 30.

Why mitochondrial injury affects optic neurons



- Neurons depend on mitochondrial oxidative phosphorylation.
- Mitochondrial dysfunction therefore particularly threatens optic-nerve function.
- Inherited optic neuropathy should not be relabeled inflammatory without evidence.

Mechanism-based differential at a glance

Mechanism	Underlying lesion	Interpretive context
Demyelinating	Myelin injury	MS / NMO / MOGAD context
Ischemic	Hypoperfusion → infarction	AION; Temporal arteritis
Pressure-related	CSF pressure → transport stasis	Papilledema
Degenerative	Ganglion-cell / axon loss	Glaucoma
Inherited/toxic	Mitochondrial or toxic injury	LHON; Methanol

Case application: First optic neuritis episode

CLINICAL REASONING

- A patient has a single demyelinating optic-nerve episode.
- Brain MRI shows additional CNS lesions.
- Question: What does the MRI contribute—and what does it not establish by itself?

INTERPRETATION

Brain lesions increase subsequent MS risk; A single attack and an imaging marker should not be described as inevitable MS progression.

Case application: Isolated attack and recovery

CLINICAL REASONING

- A first episode of optic nerve demyelination resolves.
- No subsequent neurologic attacks are yet documented.
- Question: Does recovery confirm or exclude future MS?

INTERPRETATION

Neither. Robbins explicitly allows recovery and a disease-free course after one episode; Longer-term risk is a separate outcome.

Case application: Optic nerves plus myelitis

CLINICAL REASONING

- A patient has nearly synchronous bilateral optic neuritis and spinal cord disease.
- Question: Which immune-mediated syndrome deserves specific consideration?
- What antigenic target makes its mechanism distinctive?

INTERPRETATION

NMO phenotype; Test the AQP4-associated astrocytopathy model, while recognizing MOG antibody-associated disease as a distinct possibility.

Case application: Two swollen optic discs

CLINICAL REASONING

- One presentation shows bilateral hyperemic optic-disc swelling.
- Another shows a swollen but pale optic nerve head.
- Question: Which pathological mechanisms are classically linked to these appearances?

INTERPRETATION

Bilateral hyperemic papilledema suggests raised CSF pressure; Pale swelling supports ischemic optic neuropathy. These clues do not replace full assessment.

Pathogenesis synthesis: Five distinct mechanisms

Mechanism	Underlying lesion	Interpretive context
Myelin	MS-related demyelination	Initially preserved axons
Astrocyte	AQP4-associated injury	Secondary myelin loss
Vascular supply	AION	Viability versus infarction
Pressure / transport	Papilledema	Swelling without typical acute loss
Axon / metabolism	Glaucoma or LHON	Chronic / metabolic dysfunction

Clinical synthesis: What a first attack tells us

- A first optic neuritis episode establishes a possible focal demyelinating event.
- Associated brain MRI lesions increase later MS risk.
- A first attack can recover without subsequent MS; Do not equate risk with certainty.
- Competing optic-neuropathy mechanisms require deliberate exclusion.

References and source boundary

- Robbins, Cotran & Kumar. Pathologic Basis of Disease. 11th ed. (2026).
- Chapter 29: The Eye—Optic Nerve and Optic Neuritis (pp. 1207–1209).
- Chapter 28: The Central Nervous System—demyelinating diseases and MS (pp. 1156–1158).
- Conceptual schematics are original PowerPoint shapes—not patient images or tissue specimens.