

Waterhouse–Friderichsen Syndrome

Fulminant septic adrenal hemorrhage

Overwhelming infection

Disseminated intravascular coagulation

Massive bilateral adrenal hemorrhage

Acute adrenocortical insufficiency

Dr Abu Suraih Sakhri

MBBS, MD (Pathology)

www.abusuraihsakhri.com

Learning objectives

Recognize

Identify the defining clinical and pathologic constellation.

Explain

Trace the interaction between sepsis, DIC and adrenal failure.

Interpret

Describe gross and microscopic hemorrhagic morphology.

Distinguish

Separate the syndrome from other causes of adrenal crisis.

Definition: Fulminant septic adrenal hemorrhage

An uncommon, catastrophic syndrome linked to disseminated bacterial infection.

Severe bilateral adrenal hemorrhage damages the cortex and produces acute primary adrenal insufficiency.

Typically accompanied by shock, DIC and widespread purpura.

Clinicopathologic point

The syndrome is more than “adrenal bleeding”: Infection, systemic coagulopathy and adrenal failure converge.

Four events define the clinical–pathologic pattern

Overwhelming bacterial infection



Systemic inflammatory and procoagulant responses



Shock, purpura and disseminated intravascular coagulation



Massive bilateral adrenal hemorrhage with cortical failure

Why the syndrome is immediately life-threatening

Vascular collapse

Rapidly progressive hypotension may culminate in shock.

Microvascular disease

DIC simultaneously produces thrombosis and bleeding.

Endocrine failure

Destruction of both adrenal cortices compromises steroid output.

Very rapid course

Untreated illness can be fatal within hours to days.

Place within adrenocortical insufficiency

Pattern	Primary abnormality	Typical relation to WFS
Primary acute	Abrupt failure of adrenal cortex	WFS is a hemorrhagic cause
Primary chronic	Progressive cortical destruction	Addison disease is a distinct context
Secondary	Insufficient pituitary corticotropin	Adrenals are not primarily destroyed

Adrenal crisis has several triggers

Stress can precipitate crisis in patients with established chronic adrenal insufficiency.

Abrupt steroid withdrawal or failure to increase replacement under stress can precipitate crisis.

Massive adrenal hemorrhage directly damages otherwise functional cortex.

WFS is the disseminated-infection-associated hemorrhagic form.

Clinicopathologic point

Bilateral hemorrhage is not automatically Waterhouse–Friderichsen syndrome.

Not every adrenal hemorrhage is WFS

WFS context

Disseminated bacterial infection

Fulminant shock and DIC

Hemorrhagic cortical destruction

Other contexts

Traumatic or hypoxic difficult delivery

Anticoagulant-associated hemorrhage

Postsurgical DIC and adrenal infarction

Bilateral disease explains endocrine collapse

Both adrenal glands are involved



Large regions of functioning cortex are damaged

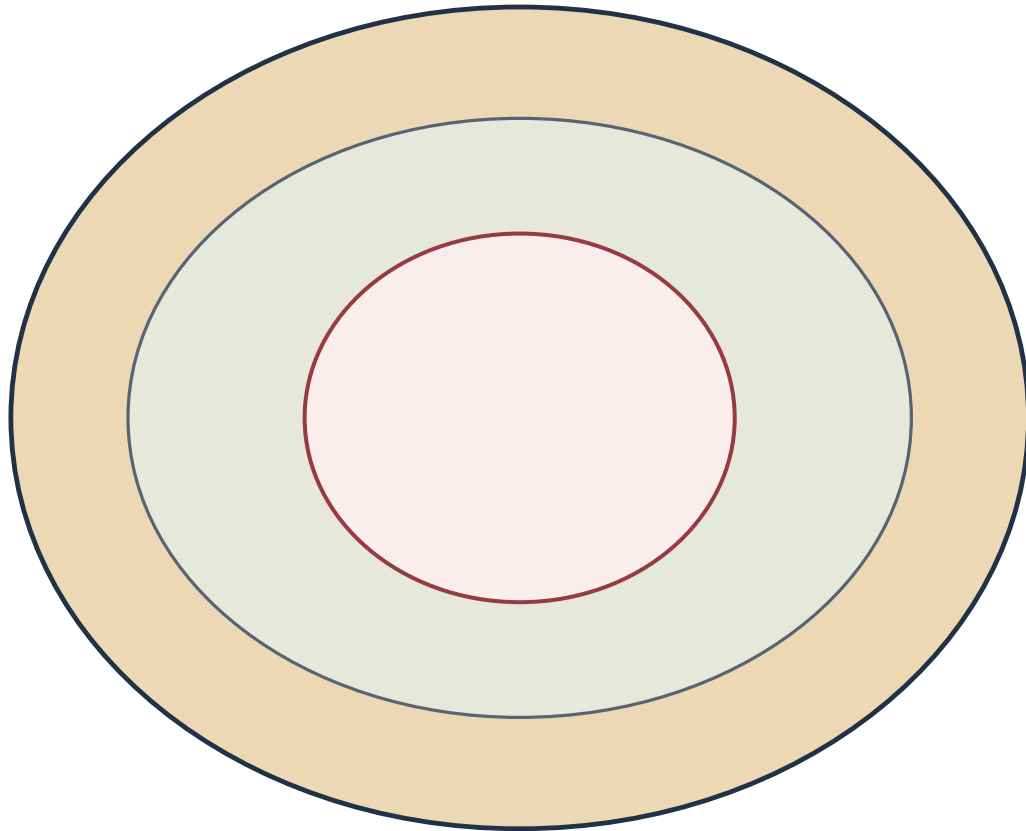


Compensatory steroid production becomes inadequate



Acute primary adrenocortical insufficiency develops

Adrenal structure: Cortex surrounding medulla



Cortex

Hormone-producing outer layers

Medulla

Inner zone with venous sinusoids

Simplified anatomical schematic — not a histologic specimen

The cortex provides essential stress hormones

Zona glomerulosa

Mineralocorticoid synthesis helps maintain extracellular fluid balance.

Zona fasciculata

Cortisol supports vascular and metabolic adaptation to stress.

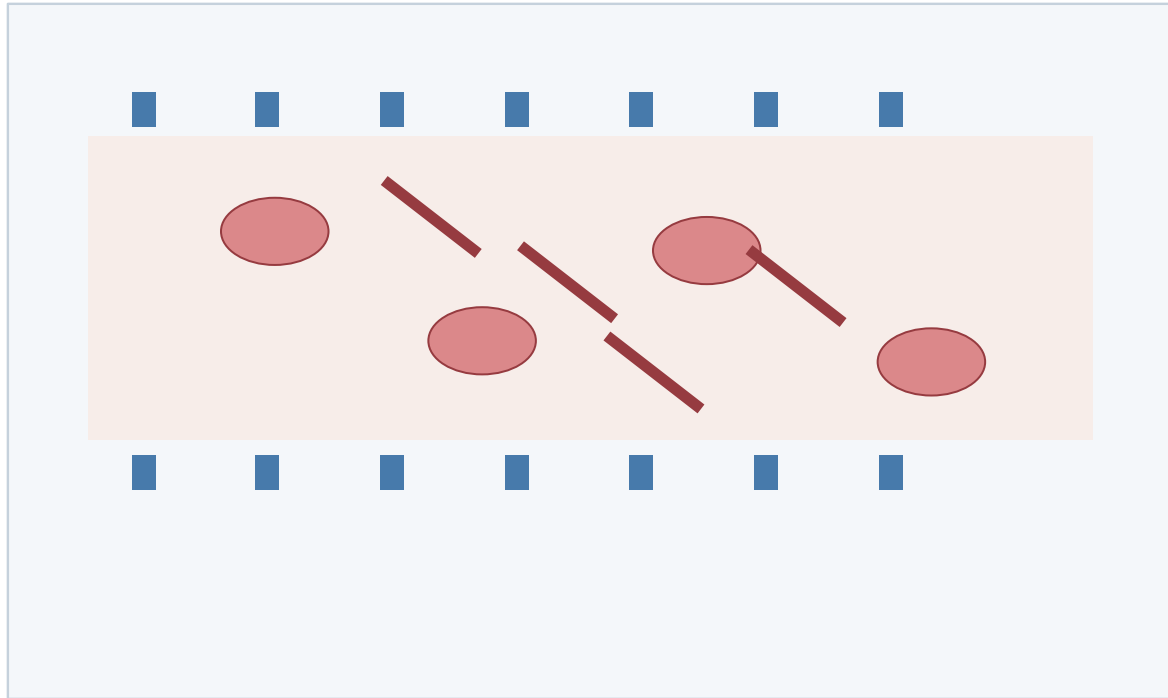
Zona reticularis

Adrenal androgen production is a separate cortical function.

Cortical destruction

Abrupt loss of functioning tissue produces primary insufficiency.

Medullary venous sinusoids: The morphologic clue



The thin-walled medullary venous sinusoids lie near the reported starting point of hemorrhage.

Bleeding can extend from medulla toward cortex.

This distribution is a pathologic observation, not proof of a unique causal route.

Conceptual microcirculatory impairment

Schematic — not a microscopic image

Cause: Classically meningococemia

Neisseria meningitidis septicemia is the archetypal association.

The defining pathogen is a virulent bacterial infection capable of systemic sepsis.

Pathogen identification supports the infectious context but morphology and clinical syndrome remain integral.

Clinicopathologic point

“Classically meningococcal” does not mean “exclusively meningococcal.”

Other organisms reported by Robbins

Pneumococci

Streptococcus pneumoniae infection may produce this syndrome.

Pseudomonas

Highly virulent Pseudomonas infection is a reported cause.

H. Influenzae

Haemophilus influenzae is also listed.

Staphylococci

Severe staphylococcal infection may rarely be implicated.

Age profile: Children predominate, not exclusively

WFS can occur at any age.

Greater frequency in children.

A young age is a clue, not a required diagnostic criterion.

An adult with overwhelming infection and bilateral hemorrhage remains within the reported spectrum.

Clinicopathologic point

The source gives no percentage or validated age cutoff; None is imposed.

Sepsis initiates a systemic inflammatory response

Microbes and microbial products enter the systemic circulation



Innate immune and endothelial activation



Cytokine amplification and vascular dysregulation



Loss of tissue perfusion and organ dysfunction

TNF and IL-1 contribute to the septic phenotype

Massive infection stimulates inflammatory mediators, including TNF and IL-1.

These mediators contribute to endothelial changes and systemic metabolic abnormalities.

The hemodynamic, coagulation and metabolic effects interact rather than occur in isolation.

Clinicopathologic point

A cytokine network acts alongside microbial factors; No single mediator fully explains the syndrome.

Vascular leakage worsens hypoperfusion

Inflammation disrupts endothelial barrier function



Protein-rich fluid moves into the interstitium



Effective circulating volume and microvascular exchange are impaired



Tissue delivery of oxygen and nutrients declines

Vasodilation accelerates the shock state

Activated endothelium produces nitric oxide and other vasoactive mediators.

Relaxation of vascular smooth muscle promotes systemic hypotension.

Leakage, altered microvascular flow and vasodilation amplify circulatory failure.

Clinicopathologic point

Septic shock can precede, coexist with or magnify adrenal insufficiency.

From inflammation to a procoagulant state

Monocytes / endothelium respond to cytokines



Tissue-factor expression and thrombin generation increase



Fibrin-rich microvascular thrombi develop



Systemic activation may progress to DIC

Natural anticoagulant pathways become impaired

Normal restraint

Tissue-factor pathway inhibitor

Thrombomodulin / protein C pathway

Control of thrombin amplification

Septic disturbance

Reduced anticoagulant signaling

Greater net thrombin activity

Susceptibility to microvascular fibrin deposition

Reduced fibrinolysis favors persistent thrombi

Sepsis can increase expression of plasminogen activator inhibitor-1 (PAI-1).

This suppresses plasmin generation and physiologic fibrin removal.

Increased coagulation plus reduced fibrinolysis favors microvascular thrombosis.

Clinicopathologic point

The balance of thrombin generation and clot breakdown is altered.

DIC is not a primary single-organ disease

Disseminated intravascular coagulation means widespread thrombosis in the microcirculation.

It represents a systemic complication of diverse underlying conditions.

In WFS, disseminated bacterial infection supplies the initiating context.

Clinicopathologic point

A systemic coagulopathy links cutaneous purpura, tissue ischemia and adrenal hemorrhage.

DIC has two simultaneous consequences

Microthrombotic injury

Fibrin deposits narrow small vessels

Tissue oxygen delivery falls

Organ ischemia / dysfunction may occur

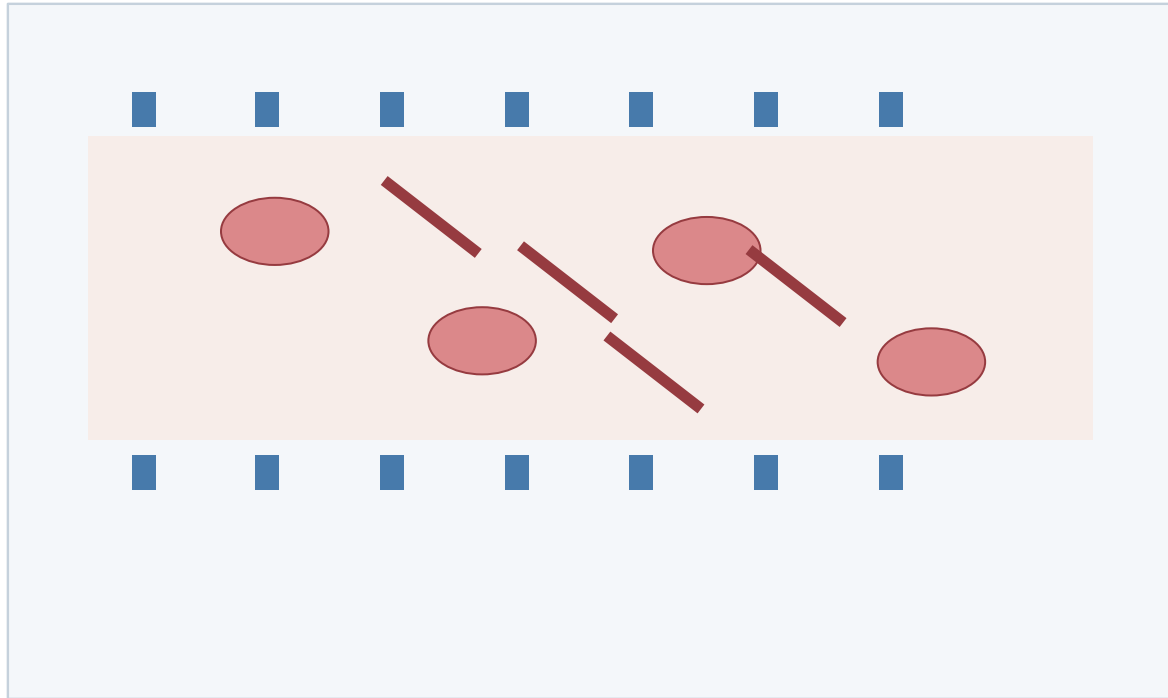
Consumptive hemorrhage

Platelets and clotting factors are consumed

Fibrinolytic activity can further impair hemostasis

Bleeding and purpura can emerge

Microvascular fibrin compromises tissue perfusion



Conceptual microcirculatory impairment

Schematic — not a microscopic image

Thrombi in small vessels restrict regional blood flow.

Ischemia is particularly important in vulnerable organ microcirculations.

Adrenal microthrombosis is implicated in the hemorrhagic phenotype.

Consumption creates the bleeding phenotype

Systemic thrombin activation



Widespread fibrin deposition



Consumption of platelets and coagulation factors



Hemorrhagic diathesis and widespread purpura

Why purpura accompanies microthrombosis

DIC causes deranged microvascular hemostasis and consumption of hemostatic components.

Cutaneous bleeding manifests as multiple purpuric lesions.

Skin purpura is conspicuous but reflects a systemic vascular disorder.

Clinicopathologic point

A purpuric rash is a major bedside clue; It is not unique to WFS.

Purpura must be interpreted with shock

Skin

Widespread purpura is a conspicuous clinical manifestation.

Circulation

Rapidly progressive hypotension indicates systemic failure.

Coagulation

DIC links hemorrhage to microvascular thrombosis.

Adrenals

Massive bilateral hemorrhage supports the specific syndrome.

Adrenal hemorrhage: Mechanisms remain uncertain

Direct seeding

Bacteria may seed small adrenal vessels.

Disseminated coagulation

DIC can produce microvascular thrombosis and hemorrhage.

Endothelial dysfunction

Microbial products and mediators may damage vascular integrity.

Interpretation

These as plausible, not proven exclusive routes.

An important causal distinction

Established

Severe sepsis commonly coexists with DIC

Massive adrenal hemorrhage occurs

Cortical destruction produces adrenal insufficiency

Mechanistic uncertainty

No single hemorrhagic mechanism is established

Direct seeding is a possibility

Endothelial injury and DIC may act together

Probable role of adrenal cortical microthrombi

Meningococccemia and systemic procoagulant activity



Fibrin thrombi in adrenal microcirculation

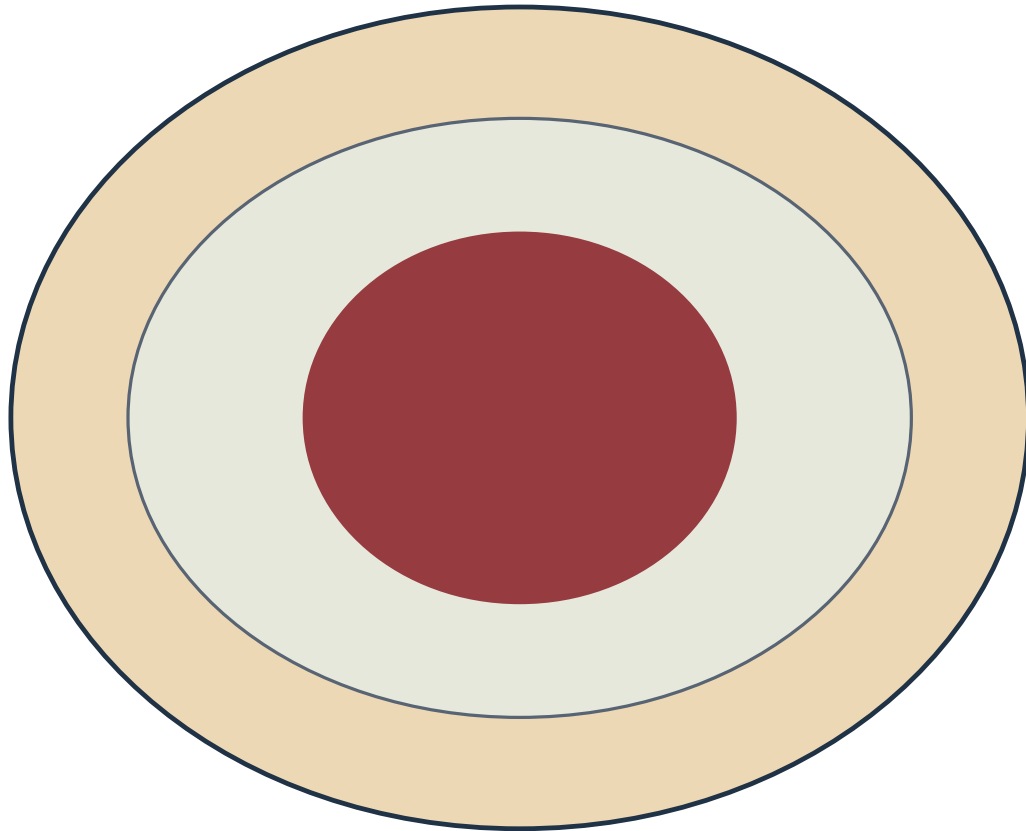


Local circulatory injury



Massive hemorrhage may ensue

Microscopic spread begins near the medulla



Cortex

Hormone-producing outer layers

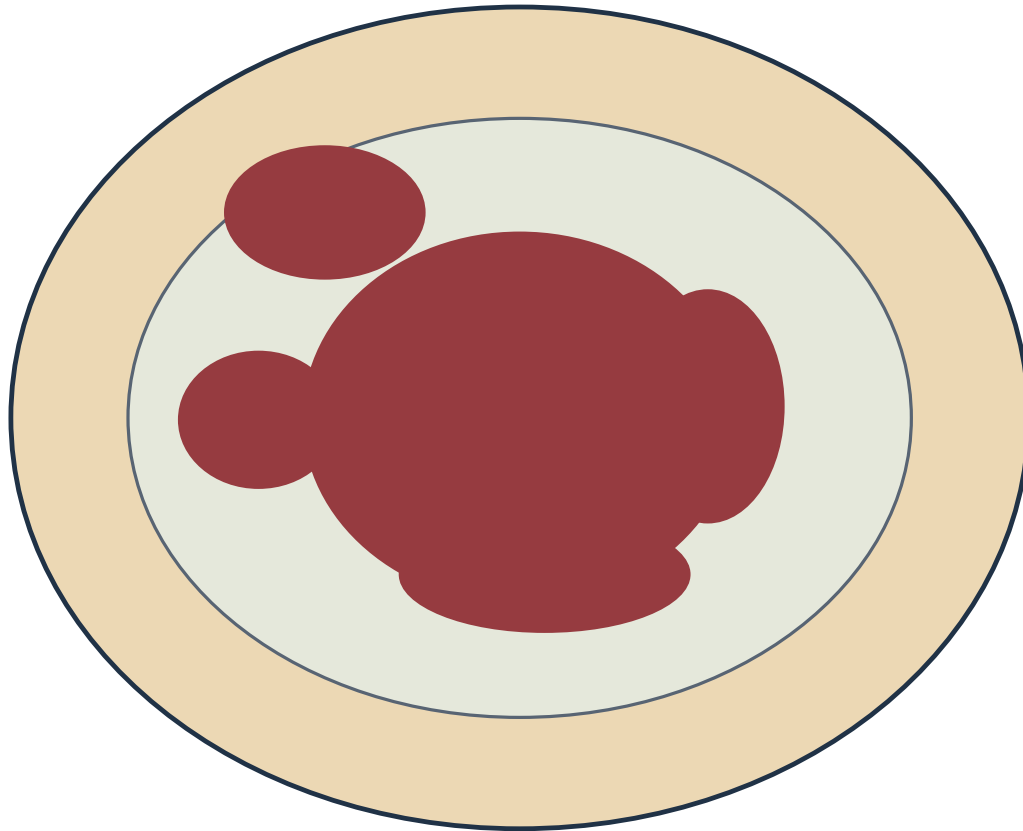
Medulla

Inner zone with venous sinusoids

Early hemorrhage

Simplified anatomical schematic — not a histologic specimen

Hemorrhage extends into cortical tissue



Cortex

Hormone-producing outer layers

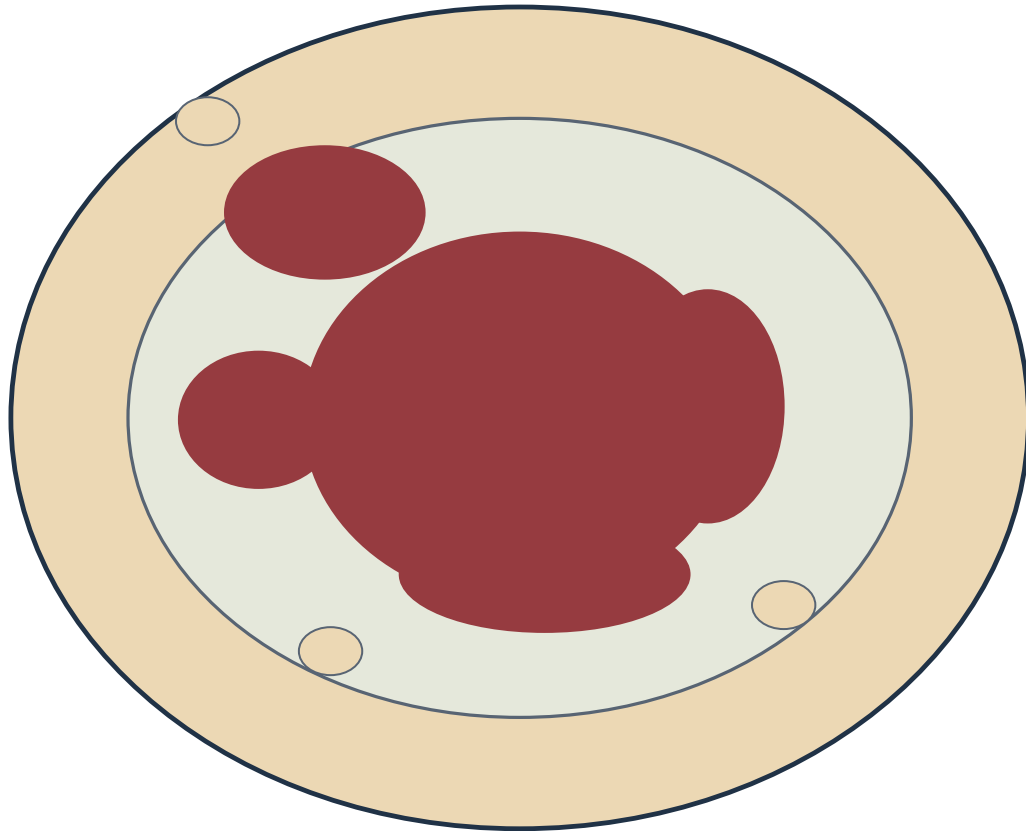
Medulla

Inner zone with venous sinusoids

Extension into cortex

Simplified anatomical schematic — not a histologic specimen

Surviving cortical islands may remain



Cortex

Hormone-producing outer layers

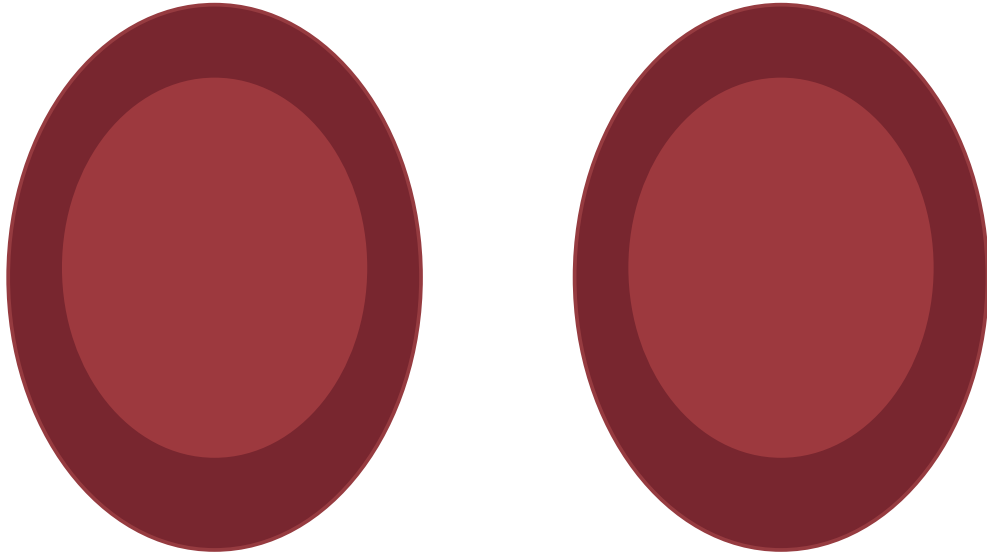
Medulla

Inner zone with venous sinusoids

Extensive hemorrhage with residual islands

Simplified anatomical schematic — not a histologic specimen

Gross morphology: Glands filled with clotted blood



Bilateral hemorrhagic glands — schematic

Massive hemorrhage effaces much of the normal architecture.

The glands as sacs of clotted blood.

Bilateral involvement is essential to the endocrine consequence.

Illustration only; Not a gross specimen photograph

Gross and microscopic findings are complementary

Gross examination

Marked adrenal hemorrhage

Architecture obscured by clot

Often bilateral involvement

Microscopic examination

Medullary sinusoidal starting region

Extension toward cortex

Residual islands of cortical cells

Recognizable cortex does not exclude adrenal failure

Histologic sampling can show residual cortical cells despite extensive hemorrhage.

Function reflects the remaining viable adrenal cortical mass, not the mere presence of scattered cells.

Severe bilateral damage can result in abrupt primary adrenal insufficiency.

Clinicopathologic point

Distinguish microscopic remnants from adequate endocrine reserve.

Adrenal insufficiency compounds septic hypotension

Overwhelming infection produces vasodilation / capillary leak



Hemorrhage destroys adrenal cortical tissue



Stress-related glucocorticoid output becomes inadequate



Cardiovascular collapse may intensify

Why loss of cortisol is important in critical illness

Glucocorticoids normally contribute to the metabolic response to acute stress.

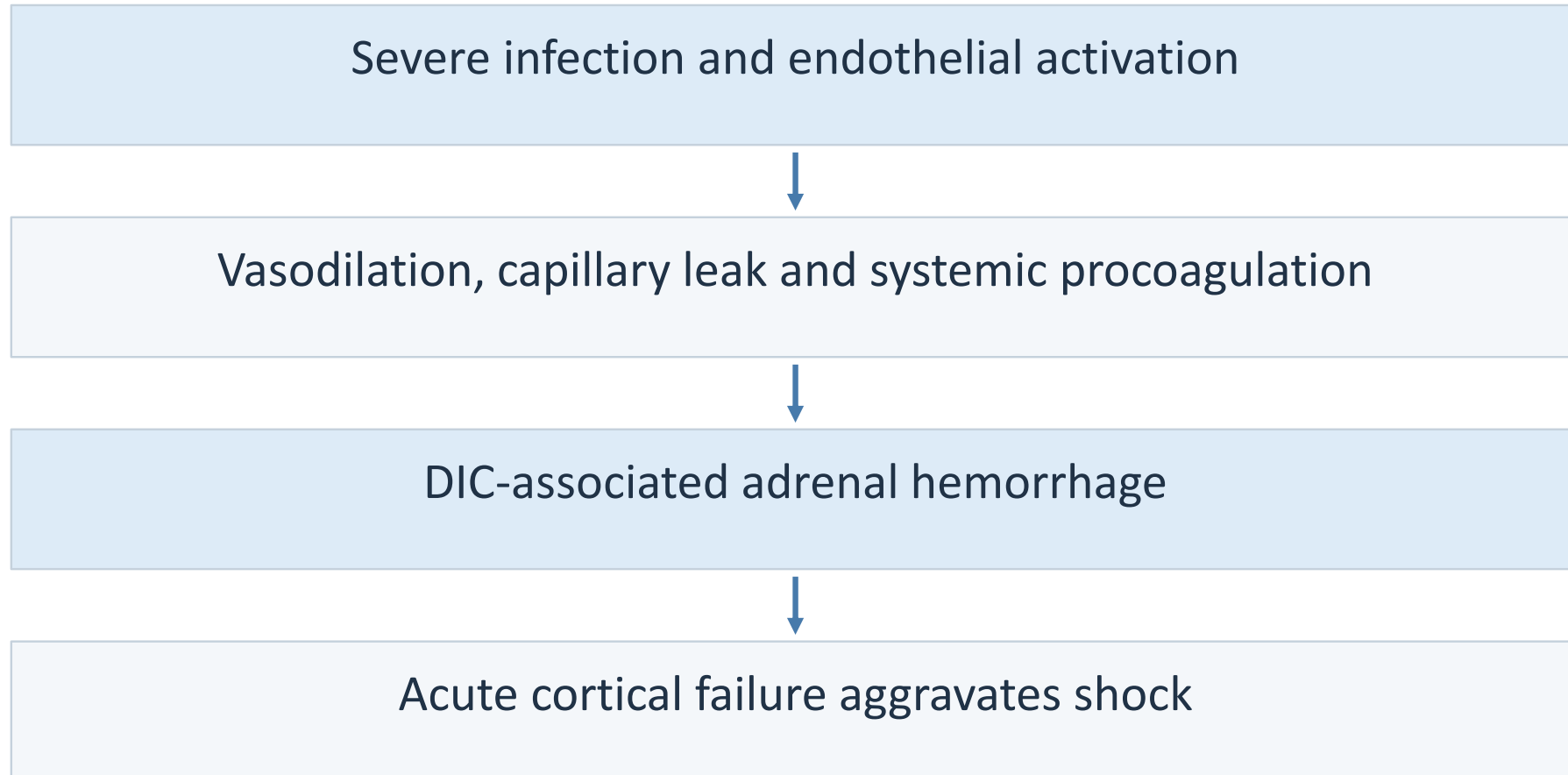
Intact cortisol production helps support cardiovascular homeostasis.

Acute cortical destruction removes this adaptive capacity during sepsis.

Clinicopathologic point

This pathophysiologic contribution is distinct from the vasodilation caused by sepsis itself.

Endocrine, vascular and coagulation injury reinforce one another



The adrenal lesion is part of multi-organ disease

Skin

Purpura reflects systemic hemorrhagic complications.

Kidneys

DIC-associated microthrombi can contribute to renal injury.

Lungs

Microvascular thrombosis and edema may impair respiratory function.

Adrenals

Bilateral hemorrhage produces a distinctive endocrine emergency.

DIC may also produce red-cell fragmentation

Erythrocytes can fragment when passing through fibrin-rich narrowed microvessels.

This process produces microangiopathic hemolytic anemia.

It is a possible systemic consequence of DIC, not a specific diagnostic hallmark of WFS.

Clinicopathologic point

Avoid conflating the general DIC phenotype with syndrome-defining features.

Tempo: Progressive collapse may occur within hours

1

Disseminated bacterial illness

2

Rapid hypotension and systemic coagulation disturbance

3

Extensive purpura and bilateral adrenal hemorrhage

4

Potential death within hours to days without prompt therapy

The defining bedside constellation

Infection

Evidence of overwhelming bacterial sepsis

Shock

Rapidly progressive hypotension

Purpura

Widespread hemorrhagic cutaneous lesions

Adrenal injury

Acute insufficiency with bilateral hemorrhage

Laboratory studies evaluate associated DIC

Study	Purpose in DIC evaluation
Platelet count	Assess consumption of platelets
PT and PTT	Assess prolongation of clotting tests
Fibrinogen	Assess consumptive depletion
Fibrin degradation products / D-dimer	Detect increased clot formation and breakdown

Interpret coagulation tests in clinical context

DIC is diagnosed using clinical observations with supporting laboratory studies.

No single laboratory result independently establishes WFS.

Evidence of infection, circulatory failure, purpura and adrenal injury must be integrated.

Clinicopathologic point

Laboratory evaluation characterizes systemic coagulopathy; It does not substitute for the whole clinicopathologic picture.

A clinicopathologic diagnostic pathway

Recognize severe infection with shock and purpura



Investigate systemic coagulopathy / possible DIC



Consider bilateral adrenal hemorrhage and acute primary adrenal failure



Integrate infection, systemic physiology and adrenal pathology

Bilateral adrenal hemorrhage has a wider differential

Clinical context	Interpretive distinction
Disseminated bacterial infection	Supports WFS when syndrome features coexist
Difficult birth with trauma / hypoxia	Neonatal hemorrhage without required sepsis context
Anticoagulant therapy	Drug-related hemorrhagic context
Postsurgical DIC	Hemorrhagic infarction may occur without bacterial WFS

WFS versus chronic Addison disease

Feature	WFS	Primary chronic Addison disease
Onset	Abrupt; fulminant	Progressive
Typical lesion	Massive bilateral hemorrhage	Chronic destruction of cortex
Clinical setting	Overwhelming bacterial infection	Varied chronic etiologies
Consequence	Acute adrenal crisis	Chronic insufficiency; crisis possible under stress

WFS versus secondary adrenal insufficiency

Feature	WFS	Secondary insufficiency
Site of primary lesion	Adrenal cortex	Hypothalamic–pituitary regulation
Defining pathology	Bilateral hemorrhagic destruction	Deficient corticotropin drive
Usual trigger	Fulminant systemic infection	Pituitary disease / steroid suppression
Systemic DIC	Often associated	Not defining

Meningococemia alone does not define WFS

Disseminated meningococcal infection can produce septic shock and purpura.

WFS identifies the syndrome with massive adrenal hemorrhage and acute cortical insufficiency.

The adrenal component is therefore critical to precise clinicopathologic naming.

Clinicopathologic point

Clinical suspicion may precede definitive demonstration of adrenal pathology.

Purpura alone does not define WFS

Purpura signals hemorrhage into the skin but has multiple mechanisms and causes.

Its diagnostic significance increases when coupled with rapidly progressive infection and shock.

Adrenal involvement is needed to complete the specific WFS pattern.

Clinicopathologic point

Do not diagnose WFS from a rash photograph in isolation.

Bilateral hemorrhage alone does not define WFS

Massive adrenal hemorrhage can occur in noninfectious settings.

The WFS label refers to hemorrhage associated with disseminated bacterial infection.

Etiologic context must accompany the gross and microscopic findings.

Clinicopathologic point

The same organ lesion may arise through different clinical routes.

Recognition and treatment cannot be delayed

Identify

Recognize shock, purpura and potential adrenal crisis.

Act

Immediate appropriate therapy.

Avoid delay

Progression may be fatal within hours to days.

Integrate

Manage as a systemic infectious, vascular and endocrine emergency.

Why time-sensitive recognition matters

Catastrophic infection may progress rapidly



DIC and shock amplify tissue damage



Bilateral hemorrhage causes sudden cortical failure



Delay risks irreversible cardiovascular collapse

Case application: Fulminant septic purpura

A child presents with overwhelming bacterial illness, rapidly falling blood pressure and widespread purpuric skin lesions.

Coagulation studies suggest systemic consumption.

What additional organ lesion would complete the classic WFS pattern?

Teaching answer: Massive bilateral adrenal hemorrhage with acute cortical failure.

Case reasoning: Connect the four findings

Disseminated infection supplies the etiologic setting.

Hypotension identifies circulatory decompensation.

Widespread purpura suggests systemic coagulopathic bleeding.

Bilateral adrenal hemorrhage explains the acute endocrine component.

Clinicopathologic point

The four findings describe one integrated process rather than independent coincidences.

Case application: Bilateral adrenal hemorrhage

A postsurgical patient receiving anticoagulant therapy develops bilateral adrenal hemorrhage.

No evidence of disseminated bacterial infection is provided.

Is it justified to call this Waterhouse–Friderichsen syndrome?

Teaching answer: No. The hemorrhagic lesion alone is not sufficient; The infectious context is missing.

Case reasoning: Syndromic names require context

Bilateral adrenal hemorrhage is a pathologic pattern with several causes.

WFS is a specifically infection-associated phenotype.

A reliable diagnosis integrates initiating illness, coagulation disorder and cortical injury.

Clinicopathologic point

Do not let a dramatic anatomic finding override etiologic precision.

Morphology interpretation: Direction of spread

A simplified adrenal section shows hemorrhage around thin-walled medullary sinusoids, extending toward the cortex.

Which pattern matches the microscopic description?

Teaching answer: Medullary initiation with extension into cortex and possible preserved cortical islands.

Morphology reasoning: Anatomy predicts function

Medullary origin explains the reported distribution of early hemorrhage.

Cortical extension disrupts steroid-producing tissue.

Bilateral diffuse involvement explains why acute primary cortical failure develops.

Clinicopathologic point

The morphology-to-function link is stronger than speculation about the initiating vascular lesion.

Mechanistic synthesis: One integrated cascade

Virulent bacterial septicemia



Inflammation, endothelial injury and procoagulant shift



Shock / DIC with adrenal microvascular damage



Bilateral hemorrhage and acute adrenal insufficiency

Key clinicopathologic distinctions

Cause

Severe disseminated bacterial infection

Systemic phenotype

Rapid hypotension, DIC and purpura

Adrenal morphology

Massive bilateral hemorrhage; Medulla-to-cortex spread

Major consequence

Acute primary adrenal insufficiency and possible fatal collapse

Source-grounded conclusions

Neisseria meningitidis is classic; Several other virulent organisms are recognized.

Hemorrhage pathways are plausible but incompletely established.

Hemorrhage begins near medullary sinusoids and extends into cortex.

Immediate recognition is essential because clinical deterioration can be extremely rapid.

Clinicopathologic point

A precise diagnosis requires infectious context, systemic disorder and adrenal pathology.

References and source scope

Robbins, Cotran & Kumar: Pathologic Basis of Disease. 11th ed. 2026. Chapter 24, “Waterhouse–Friderichsen Syndrome,” p. 1019.

Robbins, Cotran & Kumar. Chapter 24, “Primary Acute Adrenocortical Insufficiency,” pp. 1018–1019 (parent context).

Robbins, Cotran & Kumar. Chapter 4, “Septic Shock” and sepsis pathogenesis, pp. 118–120 (mechanistic context).

Robbins, Cotran & Kumar. Chapter 14, “Disseminated Intravascular Coagulation,” p. 609 (mechanistic context).