

Deciphering The Gut-Brain Connection: Insights Into Neurodegenerative Disorders

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ABSTRACT:

The complex interaction between the gastrointestinal system and the central nervous system has become a captivating area of study, particularly about neurodegenerative diseases. This review critically examines the evolving understanding of the gut-brain axis and its significant implications for diseases such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). The gut-brain axis represents a two-way communication system that involves neural, hormonal, and immunological pathways, which are mediated by the gut microbiota, microbial metabolites, and the enteric nervous system. Disruption of this axis has been implicated in the development and progression of neurodegenerative disorders. We delve into the role of gut dysbiosis in neuroinflammation, exploring how changes in the composition of the gut microbiota can trigger immune responses that affect neuronal function and survival. Additionally, we discuss the impact of microbial metabolites, such as short-chain fatty acids and neurotransmitters, on neuroprotective mechanisms, providing insight into the intricate communication between the gut and the brain. In the case of Alzheimer's disease, accumulating evidence suggests a connection between gut dysbiosis, amyloid-beta deposition, and neuroinflammation, opening up possibilities for microbiota-targeted interventions aimed at slowing down disease progression. Similarly, in Parkinson's disease, alterations in the composition of the gut microbiota have been linked to the aggregation of alpha-synuclein and motor dysfunction, indicating the potential therapeutic benefits of modulating the gut microbiota to alleviate symptoms and alter the course of the disease.

Keywords: Neurodegenerative, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), gut microbiota

INTRODUCTION: -

Neurodegenerative disorders (ND) manifest as the progressive deterioration of axons and neurons in various regions of the central nervous system (CNS), leading to impairments in movement and/or cognitive functions. These intricate disorders are intricately linked to oxidative stress and inflammation, which are the primary systemic factors exacerbating the process of neurodegeneration (1,2). The number of individuals affected by neurodegenerative diseases (NDs) is on the rise, primarily due to the extension of human lifespan. It is projected that by the year 2030, the population of ND patients in the United States will exceed 8 million (3). Neurodegenerative disorders, including Parkinson's Disease (PD) and Alzheimer's Disease (AD), encompass a diverse range of conditions characterized by the progressive decline of the central and/or peripheral nervous systems. These ailments impact approximately

1% and 8% of the population, respectively (4) and In 1869, the renowned French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot provided the initial description of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). He established a correlation between the gradual paralysis experienced by patients and the presence of abnormalities in the white and gray matter of the central nervous system (CNS) (5). Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) is a neurodegenerative condition that primarily affects adults and leads to the progressive degeneration and eventual demise of motor neurons. This debilitating disorder results in the targeted demise of motor neurons, ultimately resulting in paralysis and ultimately, death (6). The interaction between the gastrointestinal tract and the central nervous system is facilitated by the gut-brain axis, which plays a crucial role in promoting the growth and upkeep of neurons. However, when there is an imbalance in the gut microbiota, known as gut dysbiosis, it can lead to the manifestation of neurological disorders (7). The gut microbiota, a diverse group of bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract, plays a crucial role in human health due to its bidirectional communication with the brain via the gut-brain axis (8,9,10).

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❖ GUT MICROBIOTA AND NEURODEGENERATION

The gut microbiota, a diverse collection of bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract, coexists with the human host, primarily comprising Firmicutes (51%), and Bacteroidetes (48%), forming a symbiotic relationship [11]. The remaining 1% consists of various less populous phyla, such as Proteobacteria, Actinobacteria (which includes the genera Bifidobacteria), Fusobacteria, Spirochaetes, Verrucomicrobia, and Lentisphaerae [12]. Modern sequencing technology has successfully detected over 1000 distinct species and in excess of 7000 variations of bacteria, which collectively form the vast population of microorganisms within the microbiota, estimated to range between 10^{13} and 10^{14} [13]. There exists considerable inter-individual variability in the gut microbial communities; nevertheless, the fundamental functionality remains consistent, indicating the necessity of a core gut microbiota to uphold a fundamental array of physiological functions [14]. The gut microbiota can be regarded as an independent organ, playing a crucial role in numerous physiological functions such as host metabolism, neurological development, energy balance, immune modulation, vitamin production, and digestion [15]. The gut microbiota denotes a constantly changing assemblage of microorganisms that reside in the gastrointestinal tract of animals, encompassing humans. Predominantly comprised of bacteria, it also encompasses fungi, archaea, parasites, and to a lesser degree, viruses [16]. According to recent research, gut bacteria may contribute to neurodegeneration by upsetting the equilibrium between the brain and the gut, therefore aggravating conditions including ALS, PD, MS, and AD [17]. Neurodegenerative disorders are

complex conditions in which the initiation of the pathological process appears to involve a combination of genetic and environmental factors [18]. Chemicals, nutrition, and immunological factors influence microbial density and composition in the GI tract, with stomach and small intestine having high acidity and shorter transit duration, limiting microbiota growth [19]. On the other hand, the colon/large intestine is densely populated with microbiota due to its anaerobic environment, slower movement of food, absorption of water, and fermentation of undigested food [20]. Depression has been consistently linked to higher prevalence in neurodegenerative disorders like Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and multiple sclerosis [21,22,23]. Depression is traditionally believed to mimic cognitive symptoms in individuals with dementia [24]. Depression, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and multiple sclerosis are all characterized by heightened immune-inflammatory processes and oxidative and nitrosative stress (O&NS). Additionally, these conditions are associated with a decline in the levels of endogenous antioxidants [25,26]. Neurodegenerative conditions often exhibit reduced levels of tryptophan, serotonin, N-acetylserotonin, and melatonin, alongside elevated TRYCATs [26,27,28]. The significance of TRYCAT pathways being influenced by O&NS and immune-inflammatory processes in relation to depression-associated conditions, such as Alzheimer's disease, is gaining more recognition [29], Parkinson's disease [26], and multiple sclerosis [28]. In general, the correlation between depression and neurodegenerative disorders is evident [30].

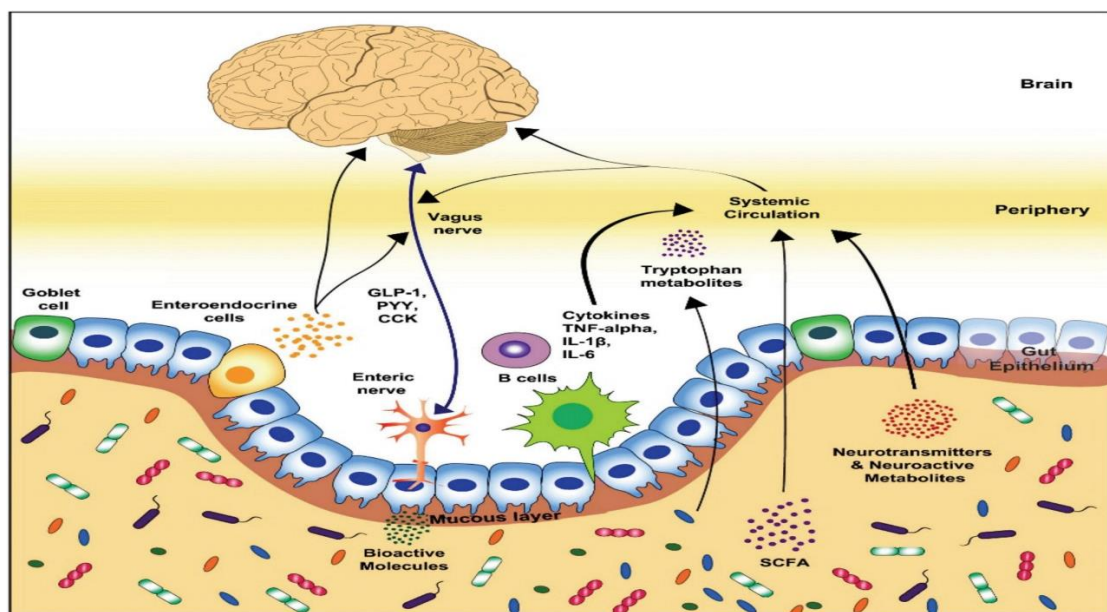


Fig.1 Gut Microbiota and Neurodegeneration

1. GUT-BRAIN AXIS IN ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE:

In the early months of 1989, the presence of Ab protein deposits was identified within the intestinal region [31]. The expression of Amyloid- β protein precursor (AbPP) and total tau in the enteric neurons suggests a potential involvement of the enteric nervous system (ENS) in the pathophysiology of Alzheimer's disease (AD) [32,33]. Nevertheless, additional validation is required for this notion as a result of conflicting reports that have demonstrated comparable levels of Ab and tau pathologies in both Alzheimer's disease patients and elderly individuals without the condition [34,35]. Animal research links gut microbiota to Alzheimer's disease (AD), with disruption causing intestinal inflammation, leading to AD onset and progression, increasing microglia activation and neuroinflammatory response. [36]. Gut-associated lymphoid tissue (GALT) cells in aged AD mice showed reduced IL-17 levels, suggesting potential immune barrier and gut microbiota surveillance impairment [37]. Reports have indicated that there is a modified composition of gut microbiota in the fecal samples obtained from patients with Alzheimer's disease (AD) as well as in AD mouse models [38–40]. The modified microbial composition has the potential to impact the concentrations of Ab42, the

deposition of amyloid, and the presence of pro-inflammatory cytokines within the brain [38]. A recent study uncovered varying levels of fecal microbiota abundance in individuals with Alzheimer's disease (AD) compared to those with normal cognitive function. The report indicated an increase in the genera *Dorea*, *Lactobacillus*, *Streptococcus*, *Bifidobacterium*, *Blautia*, and *Escherichia* among AD patients. Conversely, a decrease in the genera *Alistipes*, *Bacteroides*, *Parabacteroides*, *Sutterella*, and *Paraprevotella* was observed in individuals with AD [41]. An inverse correlation was observed between the amyloid burden and the relative abundance of *Lactobacillus* in the feces of individuals with Alzheimer's disease (AD) [41]. A study found that cognitively impaired patients with brain amyloidosis had lower anti-inflammatory *E. rectale* abundance and higher pro-inflammatory *Escherichia/Shigella* abundance in their fecal samples, increased pro-inflammatory cytokines (IL-6, CXCL2, NLRP3 and IL-1 β), and lower anti-inflammatory cytokine levels [42]. These findings provide evidence for a correlation between inflammation related to gut microbiota and the accumulation of amyloid plaques in the brain in individuals with Alzheimer's disease (AD) [43].

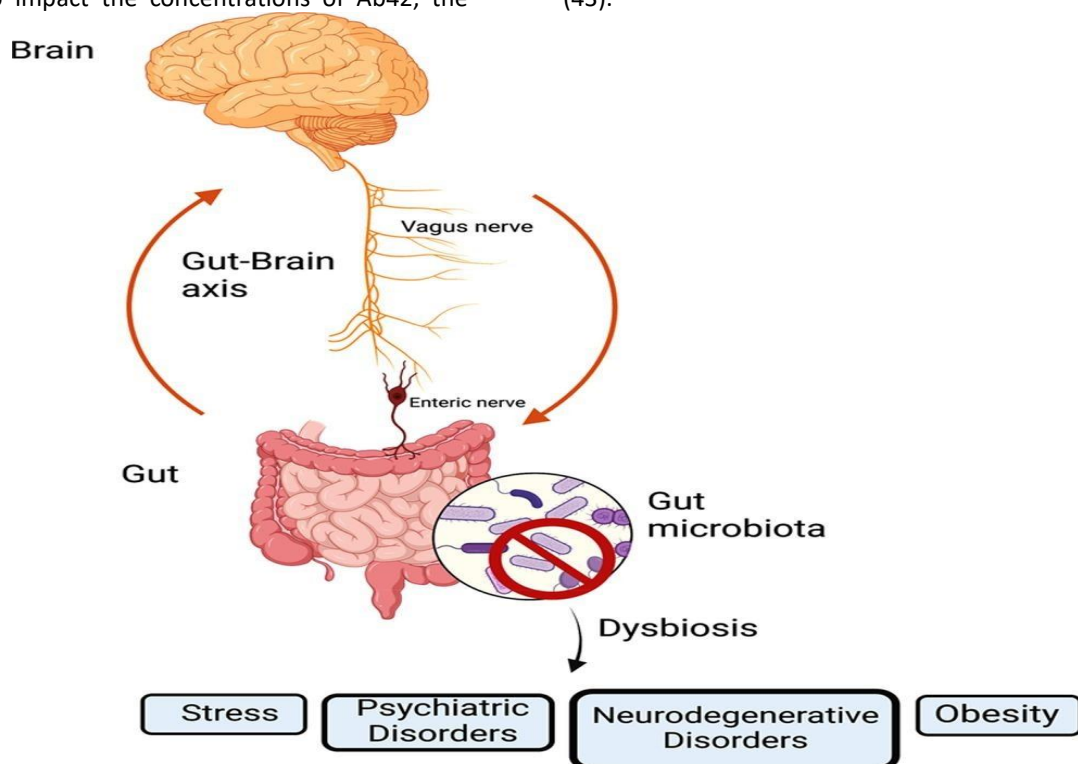


Fig.2 Gut-Brain Axis in Alzheimer's Disease

2. GUT-BRAIN AXIS IN PARKINSON'S DISEASE:

This review focuses on investigating the relationship between microbial composition and the observable changes in the metabolites of microbial species. It also explores the impact of this relationship on the immune response, which could potentially have significant implications for the development, persistence, and

pathophysiology of Parkinson's disease through the gut-brain axis (44). The enteric nervous system interacts with a wide range of microorganisms, both beneficial and pathogenic, that reside in the gut, resulting in a rich diversity of microbial populations (45). The abundance and variety of commensal bacteria play a crucial role in supporting physiological functions and enhancing the

overall well-being of the host organism (46). The enzymatic activity and metabolic pathways of the gut microbiota are believed to play a crucial role in supporting human metabolism. This microbial community aids in various processes such as digestion, the production of essential vitamins and nutrients, and the removal of harmful substances from the body (46). Additionally, it may aid in preserving the structural soundness of the intestinal barrier, impeding the growth of harmful microorganisms, and facilitating the breakdown and elimination of pharmaceuticals and harmful substances (47). In addition, the host immune response can be regulated by the gut microbiome through the production of metabolites, such as short-chain fatty acids. These metabolites have the ability to

modulate the activity of the immune system, including microglia, by either suppressing or stimulating its response (48). The commencement of constipation may also precede the motor symptoms and exacerbate with the progression of the disease [49,50]. Recent research has provided increasing empirical support regarding the microbiome, highlighting the potential influence of gut microbiota on disease development. This notion has been extensively examined and discussed in a recent publication authored by Sampson et al [51]. It is widely recognized that the primary pathological feature of PD SNpc neurons is the presence of Lewy bodies, which are characterized by the accumulation of toxic alpha-synuclein (α Syn) aggregates [52].

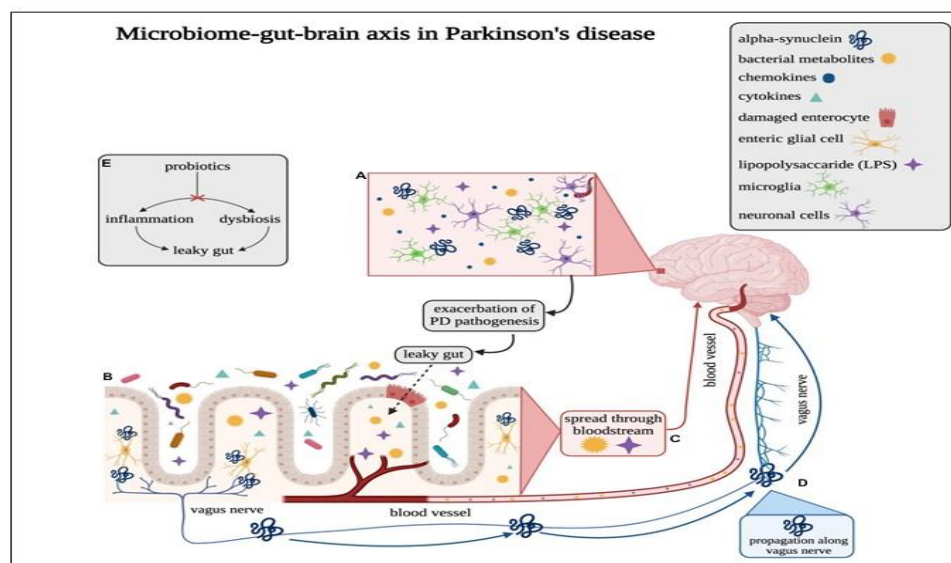


Fig.3 Gut-Brain Axis in Parkinson's Disease

3. GUT-BRAIN AXIS IN AMYOTROPHIC LATERAL SCLEROSIS (ALS):

ALS is a neurodegenerative disease-causing progressive paralysis and weakness in the spinal cord, brain stem, and motor cortex. Factors like microglia-activated inflammation, neurotoxicity, redox unbalance, and mitochondrial dysfunction are implicated, but the deep pathological mechanism remains unexplored (53). The 2019 study on the gut microbiome in ALS patients and the SOD1G93A mouse model is a significant advancement in understanding its functional characteristics. It identified alterations in the gut microbiome, which were linked to the biological activity of nicotinamide, potentially affecting mitochondrial gene expression in the spinal cord. These changes were found to be associated with disease severity (54).

ALS is a neurodegenerative disease that gradually worsens over time and impacts the neurons in both the brain and spinal cord. This disorder is characterized by its multi-system nature, as it also affects the gastrointestinal tract. One possible explanation for this is the heightened permeability of the intestine, leading

to an increase in the presence of lipopolysaccharide in the bloodstream (LPS) (55,56).

a) Dysbiosis of gut microbiota in ALS

Research on aging is gaining prominence, with gut microbiota dysbiosis being one of the twelve characteristics of aging, revealing a close correlation between aging and gut microbiota [57]. The composition and diversity of gut microbiota, including the Firmicutes/Bacteroides ratio, will change with age [58, 59]. Dysbiosis of gut microbiota was also observed in two mouse models of progeria [60]. Dysbiosis in gut microbiota affects aging, as transplanting aged mice's fecal microbiota into young mice increases pro-inflammatory cytokines and activated microglia, leading to age-related neuroinflammation and other aging conditions [61]. The fecal microbiota of young mice was transplanted into old mice, resulting in a significant improvement in their aging condition [61]. ALS, an age-related neurodegenerative disease, is linked to gut microbiota. A study on SOD1G93A mice revealed that ALS progression can alter gut microbiota, affecting

mice's lifespan. Understanding ALS patients' gut microbiota could aid understanding (62).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future research on neurodegenerative diseases and the gut-brain axis includes nutritional interventions, multi-omic approaches, personalized microbiome modulation, early detection biomarkers, microbiota-targeted therapies, advanced imaging techniques, clinical trials, and lifestyle modifications. These approaches aim to revolutionize treatment, provide early diagnosis, and explore the relationship between gut microbiota and disease progression.

CONCLUSION

The main point of the text is that the gut-brain axis, mediated by the gut microbiota, plays a significant role in the development and progression of neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Disruption of this axis, through gut dysbiosis, can trigger immune responses and neuroinflammation, leading to neuronal dysfunction and degeneration. Modulating the gut microbiota may have therapeutic benefits in slowing down disease progression and alleviating symptoms.

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