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Neurotoxin Effects of Mercury Exposure on Mammalian Brain Cells: Mechanisms and Cellular Damage

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ABSTRACT

Mercury is a pervasive environmental neurotoxin with well-documented effects on the mammalian central nervous system. This study investigates the cellular and molecular mechanisms underlying mercury-induced neurotoxicity in mammalian brain cells. Studies Using in vitro cultures of primary cortical neurons and astrocytes, as well as in vivo rodent models, have examined the impact of both organic (methylmercury) and inorganic mercury exposure on neuronal viability, oxidative stress, mitochondrial function, and synaptic integrity. Results demonstrate that mercury exposure leads to significant dose- and time-dependent reductions in neuronal survival, primarily mediated by increased production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and disruption of antioxidant defense systems. Mitochondrial dysfunction was evident through decreased membrane potential and impaired ATP synthesis, contributing to apoptotic and necrotic cell death pathways. Additionally, mercury interfered with calcium homeostasis and glutamate signaling, promoting excitotoxicity and synaptic degeneration. At the molecular level, altered expression of genes associated with inflammation, apoptosis, and neuroprotection was observed, alongside activation of microglial cells, indicating a strong neuroinflammatory response. Histopathological analysis further confirmed structural damage in key brain regions such as the hippocampus and cortex. Overall, the findings highlight the multifaceted neurotoxic effects of mercury on mammalian brain cells and underscore the importance of mitigating environmental and occupational exposure. This study serve to contributes to a deeper understanding of mercury-induced neurodegeneration which may address future therapeutic strategies for neuroprotection.

***Keywords**: Mercury Neurotoxicity, Methylmercury, Mammalian Brain Cells, Oxidative Stress, Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS), Mitochondrial Dysfunction.*

Introduction

Mercury is a naturally occurring heavy metal that has become a significant environmental and public health concern due to its widespread distribution and potent toxicity. Anthropogenic activities such as industrial emissions, coal combustion, artisanal gold mining, and improper waste disposal have markedly increased mercury levels in air, water, and soil, leading to enhanced human exposure. Among its various chemical forms, methylmercury is particularly hazardous due to its high lipid solubility, bioaccumulation in the food chain, and ability to readily cross the blood–brain barrier. As a result, the central nervous system is one of the primary targets of mercury toxicity, especially in mammals, where it can induce severe and often irreversible neurological damage.

The neurotoxic effects of mercury have been well documented in both epidemiological studies and experimental models. A classic example is the Minamata disease, which highlighted the devastating

consequences of chronic methylmercury exposure on human populations. Clinical manifestations of mercury neurotoxicity include cognitive impairment, motor dysfunction, sensory disturbances, and developmental abnormalities, particularly in fetuses and young individuals. These effects underscore the vulnerability of the mammalian brain to mercury-induced damage.

At the cellular level, mercury exerts its toxic effects through multiple interconnected mechanisms. One of the primary pathways involves the induction of oxidative stress, characterized by excessive production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and depletion of intracellular antioxidant defenses such as glutathione. This imbalance leads to lipid peroxidation, protein denaturation, and DNA damage, ultimately compromising neuronal integrity and survival. In addition, mercury disrupts mitochondrial function by impairing electron transport chain activity, reducing ATP production, and triggering apoptotic signaling pathways.

Another critical aspect of mercury-induced neurotoxicity is its interference with calcium homeostasis and neurotransmitter systems. Mercury can alter calcium ion flux across neuronal membranes, leading to dysregulated intracellular signaling and activation of calcium-dependent enzymes that contribute to cell death. Furthermore, it affects glutamatergic neurotransmission, promoting excitotoxicity a process in which excessive stimulation of neurons results in structural and functional damage. Glial cells, including astrocytes and microglia, are also significantly affected, with mercury exposure triggering neuroinflammatory responses that exacerbate neuronal injury.

Despite extensive research, the precise molecular pathways underlying mercury-induced neurotoxicity remain incompletely understood. Variability in experimental models, exposure levels, and forms of mercury complicates the interpretation of findings and limits the development of effective therapeutic interventions. Therefore, a comprehensive review of the mechanisms of mercury toxicity at the cellular and molecular levels is essential.

The present study aims to explore the neurotoxic effects of mercury exposure on mammalian brain cells, focusing on key mechanisms such as oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, excitotoxicity, and neuroinflammation. By integrating in vitro and in vivo approaches, this study seeks to provide a clearer understanding of how mercury disrupts neuronal and glial function, contributing to the broader field of neurodegenerative research and informing strategies for prevention and treatment.

Forms of Mercury and Their Toxicity

Form of Mercury	Chemical Nature	Common Sources	Route of Exposure	Ability to Cross BBB	Target Organs	Toxic Effects
Elemental Mercury (Hg^0)	Liquid metal	Thermometers, dental amalgam, industrial use	Inhalation (vapors)	High (after inhalation)	Brain (CNS)	Tremors, memory loss, behavioral changes
Inorganic Mercury (Hg^+, Hg^{2+})	Mercury salts	Batteries, disinfectants, industrial chemicals	Ingestion, skin contact	Low	Kidneys, nervous system	Enzyme inhibition, kidney damage, cellular toxicity
Organic Mercury (Methylmercury)	Carbon-bound mercury	Contaminated fish, seafood	Ingestion	Very High	Brain (especially developing brain)	Severe neurotoxicity, developmental defects; linked to Minamata disease

Mechanisms of Mercury-Induced Neurotoxicity

Mercury exerts profound neurotoxic effects on mammalian brain cells through multiple, interrelated molecular and cellular pathways. These mechanisms collectively disrupt neuronal homeostasis, impair synaptic function, and ultimately lead to neurodegeneration. The following sections provide a research-oriented explanation of the main mechanisms involved:

- **Oxidative Stress and Redox Imbalance**

One of the primary mechanisms of mercury toxicity is the induction of oxidative stress. Mercury has a high affinity for sulfhydryl (–SH) groups, leading to depletion of intracellular antioxidants such as glutathione. This results in excessive generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS), including superoxide radicals and hydrogen peroxide. The imbalance between ROS production and antioxidant defenses

causes lipid peroxidation, protein oxidation, and DNA damage, ultimately compromising neuronal integrity.

- **Mitochondrial Dysfunction**

Mercury directly targets mitochondria, disrupting the electron transport chain and oxidative phosphorylation. This leads to decreased ATP production and loss of mitochondrial membrane potential. Additionally, mercury-induced mitochondrial damage promotes the release of pro-apoptotic factors such as cytochrome c, activating intrinsic apoptotic pathways. Energy depletion further exacerbates neuronal vulnerability and cell death.

- **Disruption of Calcium Homeostasis**

Intracellular calcium (Ca^{2+}) regulation is critical for neuronal signaling and survival. Mercury interferes with calcium channels and transporters, leading to abnormal accumulation of Ca^{2+} within neurons. Elevated intracellular calcium activates calcium-dependent enzymes such as proteases, phospholipases, and endonucleases, which degrade essential cellular components and contribute to neuronal injury.

- **Excitotoxicity via Glutamatergic Dysregulation**

Mercury alters glutamate uptake and release mechanisms, particularly in astrocytes, leading to increased extracellular glutamate levels. This overstimulates NMDA and AMPA receptors on neurons, resulting in excessive calcium influx and excitotoxic damage. Persistent excitotoxicity leads to synaptic dysfunction and neuronal death, particularly in regions like the hippocampus.

- **Binding to Proteins and Enzyme Inhibition**

Due to its strong affinity for thiol and selenol groups, mercury binds to structural and enzymatic proteins, altering their conformation and function. This interaction inhibits key metabolic enzymes, especially protein kinases, disrupts cytoskeletal proteins, and impairs ion transport systems. Such widespread protein dysfunction contributes significantly to cellular toxicity.

- **Neuroinflammation and Glial Activation**

Mercury exposure activates microglia and astrocytes, leading to the release of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α, IL-1β, and IL-6. Chronic neuroinflammation amplifies neuronal damage by promoting oxidative stress, disrupting synaptic signaling, and enhancing apoptotic pathways. Glial dysfunction also impairs neuronal support systems.

- **Disruption of Neurotransmitter Systems**

Mercury interferes with multiple neurotransmitter systems, including dopaminergic, serotonergic, and cholinergic pathways. Alterations in neurotransmitter synthesis, release, and reuptake contribute to cognitive deficits, motor dysfunction, and behavioral abnormalities observed in mercury toxicity.

- **Cytoskeletal Damage and Impaired Axonal Transport**

Mercury disrupts the structural integrity of neuronal cytoskeleton components such as microtubules and neurofilaments. This impairs axonal transport, which is essential for the movement of organelles and neurotransmitters along neurons. neuronal connectivity and communication are significantly affected.

- **Genotoxicity and Apoptotic Pathways**

Mercury induces DNA strand breaks and chromosomal abnormalities through oxidative mechanisms. It activates both intrinsic (mitochondrial) and extrinsic apoptotic pathways, involving caspase activation and nuclear fragmentation. This leads to programmed cell death and contributes to progressive neurodegeneration.

- **Blood–Brain Barrier (BBB) Disruption**

Mercury, particularly methylmercury, can alter the integrity of the blood–brain barrier by affecting tight junction proteins. Increased BBB permeability allows further of toxic substances into the brain, exacerbating neuronal damage and inflammation.

Review of literature

Mariana Leal-Nazaré et al. (2024) emphasized the role of glial cells in mercury-induced neurotoxicity. Their findings suggested that astrocytes and microglia significantly influence oxidative stress, glutamate imbalance, and inflammatory responses in the brain.

Studies of Kawata et al. 2007. Jin et al. Hwang, 2012and Martinez- Finley and Aschner,2014 have shown the inorganic mercury exposure can cause activation the oxidative stress genes.

Ana Paula Novo et al. (2023) examined cellular and molecular mechanisms of mercury toxicity and reported that mitochondrial dysfunction and neuroinflammation are critical contributors to neuronal damage. Their study also highlighted the involvement of glial cells in amplifying neurotoxic effects.

Xiaoyan Li et al. (2019) focused on oxidative stress in methylmercury-induced neurodevelopmental toxicity. They demonstrated that increased production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) leads to DNA damage, lipid peroxidation, and impaired neuronal development.

Monica Crespo-Lopez et al. (2016) explored the genotoxic effects of mercury and concluded that mercury exposure leads to chromosomal abnormalities and DNA strand breaks, contributing to neurodegeneration.

Research Gap

Despite extensive research on mercury-induced neurotoxicity, several critical gaps remain in the existing literature. Most studies focus on isolated mechanisms such as oxidative stress or mitochondrial dysfunction, with limited efforts to integrate multiple pathways into a comprehensive framework. There is also a lack of sufficient research on chronic low-dose exposure, which is more relevant to real-world environmental conditions. Additionally, current studies are largely neuron-centric, with inadequate attention given to the role of glial cells and their interactions with neurons. Variability in experimental models, exposure conditions, and forms of mercury further limits the comparability and generalization of findings. Moreover, a significant gap exists in translating experimental results to human health outcomes, as most evidence is derived from in vitro or animal studies. The precise molecular signaling pathways and reliable biomarkers for early detection are not yet fully established. Furthermore, limited research has been conducted on developmental neurotoxicity and the long-term effects of prenatal exposure. Finally, there is a scarcity of effective and clinically validated neuroprotective strategies, as well as insufficient exploration of combined toxicity with other environmental pollutants. These gaps highlight the need for more integrated, standardized, and human-relevant research in this field.

Objectives of the study

General Objective

- To investigate the neurotoxic effects of mercury exposure on mammalian brain cells, with a focus on underlying molecular mechanisms and the extent of cellular damage.

Specific Objectives

- To analyze different forms of mercury toxicity
- To evaluate oxidative stress induced by mercury exposure
- To investigate mitochondrial dysfunction
- To study disruption of calcium homeostasis
- To examine excitotoxic effects
- To assess protein binding and enzyme inhibition

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation form a critical component of the present study, enabling the transformation of experimental observations into meaningful scientific conclusions about the neurotoxic effects of mercury on mammalian brain cells. In this study, quantitative data derived from investigators regarding various biochemical and cellular assays such as cell viability tests, measurements of oxidative stress markers, mitochondrial function analysis, intracellular calcium levels, and apoptotic indicators are systematically evaluated to assess the extent and nature of mercury-induced damage.

The analysis focuses on identifying dose-dependent and time-dependent relationships between mercury exposure, particularly methylmercury, and changes in neuronal and glial cell function.

The review of published literature on mercury-induced neurotoxicity in mammalian brain cells revealed that mercury, particularly methylmercury (MeHg), produces severe structural, biochemical, and functional damage in the central nervous system. The findings from various in vitro, in vivo, and epidemiological studies consistently demonstrated that mammalian brain cells are highly sensitive to mercury exposure.

One of the major findings of the reviewed studies was that oxidative stress is the primary mechanism responsible for mercury-induced neuronal injury. Mercury exposure increases the generation of reactive oxygen species (ROS), decreases antioxidant enzyme activity, and promotes lipid peroxidation, resulting in cellular membrane damage and neuronal degeneration. Studies reported depletion of glutathione (GSH), mitochondrial dysfunction, and disruption of intracellular calcium balance in exposed brain tissues.

The review further showed that mercury interferes with mitochondrial activity and ATP production, leading to energy failure in neurons. Mitochondrial impairment activates apoptotic pathways, resulting in programmed cell death. Researchers observed activation of caspases, DNA fragmentation, chromatin condensation, and neuronal apoptosis in different regions of the mammalian brain, especially the cerebellum and cerebral cortex.

Another important conclusion was that mercury disrupts neurotransmitter regulation, particularly glutamate homeostasis. Excess glutamate accumulation causes excitotoxicity, which overstimulates neurons and damages synaptic signaling. Altered calcium signaling and excessive neuronal excitation were repeatedly identified as key contributors to neurodegeneration. The review also found that developing brain cells are more vulnerable to mercury toxicity than mature neurons. Neural stem cells and progenitor cells exposed to mercury showed impaired proliferation, migration, and differentiation. Prenatal and early-life exposure resulted in developmental abnormalities, cognitive impairment, and long-term neurological dysfunction in mammalian models.

- Several studies highlighted region-specific vulnerability in the brain. Cerebellar granule cells, cortical neurons, and hippocampal regions were identified as the most affected areas, whereas some neuronal populations showed comparatively greater resistance. This selective susceptibility was associated with differences in antioxidant defense systems and cellular metabolism.
- The literature review additionally indicated that mercury exposure stimulates neuroinflammation through activation of microglia and astrocytes. Increased inflammatory cytokine release further aggravates neuronal damage and accelerates neurodegenerative processes. Chronic exposure was linked with impaired neurogenesis and synaptic dysfunction.
- Another significant finding was that mercury binds strongly to sulfhydryl and selenol groups of proteins, thereby disrupting essential enzymes and cellular signaling pathways. This interaction impairs antioxidant defense mechanisms and contributes to long-term neuronal toxicity.
- Overall, the review concluded that mercury exposure causes extensive cellular damage in mammalian brain cells through interconnected mechanisms involving oxidative stress, mitochondrial dysfunction, apoptosis, neuroinflammation, excitotoxicity, and impaired neurodevelopment. The evidence strongly suggests that prolonged or high-level mercury exposure can lead to irreversible neurological disorders and cognitive deficits in mammals.

Overview of Key Findings

The study demonstrates that mercury exposure produces dose- and time-dependent neurotoxicity in mammalian brain cells. Among different forms, methylmercury exhibited the highest neurotoxic potential due to its lipophilicity and efficient penetration across the blood–brain barrier. Neuronal cultures showed reduced viability, altered morphology, and impaired synaptic function, while glial cells exhibited activation consistent with inflammatory responses.

Oxidative Stress as a Central Mechanism

Studies indicate that oxidative stress is the primary initiating event in mercury-induced neurotoxicity. Elevated levels of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and depletion of antioxidants such as glutathione were consistently observed. This redox imbalance led to lipid peroxidation, protein oxidation, and DNA damage. The findings align with existing literature suggesting that oxidative stress acts as a triggering and amplifying factor for downstream neurodegenerative processes.

Mitochondrial Dysfunction and Energy Failure

Mitochondrial impairment emerged as a critical consequence of mercury exposure. Observations included decreased mitochondrial membrane potential and reduced ATP production. These changes indicate disruption of oxidative phosphorylation and energy metabolism. The release of pro-apoptotic factors suggests that mitochondria play a central role in initiating apoptosis, linking metabolic failure to neuronal death.

Calcium Dysregulation and Excitotoxicity

The study found significant disruption in intracellular calcium (Ca^{2+}) homeostasis. Elevated Ca^{2+} levels activated degradative enzymes, contributing to cellular damage. Additionally, impaired glutamate regulation resulted in excitotoxicity, where excessive neuronal stimulation caused structural and functional damage. This mechanism was particularly evident in hippocampal neurons, which are highly sensitive to excitatory imbalance.

Protein Interaction and Enzyme Inhibition

Mercury's strong affinity for sulfhydryl (–SH) groups resulted in widespread protein dysfunction. Enzyme inhibition and structural protein alterations disrupted essential cellular processes, including metabolism and cytoskeletal stability. This molecular interference explains the broad-spectrum toxicity of mercury at relatively low concentrations.

Neuroinflammation and Glial Activation

The activation of microglia and astrocytes indicated a robust neuroinflammatory response. Increased levels of pro-inflammatory cytokines (e.g., TNF-α, IL-1β) were observed, which further exacerbated neuronal damage. The findings suggest that inflammation is not merely a secondary response but an active contributor to neurodegeneration.

Conclusion

The present study concludes that mercury exposure causes significant and progressive neurotoxic effects in mammalian brain cells through a complex and interconnected set of molecular and cellular mechanisms. Among its different forms, organic mercury particularly methylmercury exhibits the highest toxicity due to its ability to easily cross the blood–brain barrier and accumulate within neural tissues. The findings indicate that oxidative stress serves as the primary initiating factor, leading to mitochondrial dysfunction, disruption of calcium homeostasis, and excitotoxicity. These processes are further intensified by protein inactivation, neuroinflammation, and disturbances in neurotransmitter systems, ultimately resulting in cytoskeletal damage, DNA fragmentation, and activation of apoptotic pathways. The observed dose-dependent decline in cell viability and function highlights the severe impact of mercury on neuronal survival and brain activity. Overall, the study demonstrates that mercury-induced neurotoxicity is multifactorial and cumulative, emphasizing the urgent need for environmental regulation, early detection, and the development of effective neuroprotective strategies.

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