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Guest Editorial

Nerve Transmitters and Receptors Associated with Schizophrenia

AJ Russo[1]*, Albert Mensah[2] and Judith Bowman[2]

[1]*Visiting Professor, Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY and Research Director, Mensah Research Institute, Warrenville, Il, USA*

[2]*Mensah Research Institute, Warrenville, Il, USA*

***Corresponding Author:** AJ Russo, Visiting Professor, Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY and Research Director, Mensah Research Institute, Warrenville, Il, USA.

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Abstract

Schizophrenia is characterized by symptoms ranging from psychosis to cognitive deficits and emotional dysregulation. Dysfunctions within glutamatergic neurotransmission are central to the disorder. At the core of this dysfunction is the idea of NMDA receptor hypofunction, which can also be reflected in changes to glutamate receptor subtypes. Elevated levels of glutamine, a metabolite of glutamate, have been documented in chronic and first-episode psychosis, and there is a correlation between abnormal glutamate levels and the symptomatic dimensions of schizophrenia. The anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), a region implicated in cognitive and emotional processing, exhibits significant glutamatergic abnormalities in schizophrenia. Studies also indicate that patients have altered glutamate levels in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), correlating with functional connections and neural activation during cognitive tasks. Overall, the involvement of neurotransmitters, particularly glutamate, and their receptors plays a critical role in the etiology of schizophrenia.

Keywords: *Schizophrenia; Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC); Nerve Transmitters*

Schizophrenia is a complex psychiatric disorder characterized by a myriad of symptoms ranging from psychosis to cognitive deficits and emotional dysregulation. Many researchers agree that glutamatergic neurotransmission, particularly involving neurotransmitters such as glutamate and its associated receptors, plays a significant role in the disorder's etiology. This response synthesizes pertinent research to examine the involvement of neurotransmitters and their receptors, focusing on glutamate and its signaling pathways, in the development and manifestation of schizophrenia.

The glutamate hypothesis of schizophrenia posits that dysfunctions within glutamatergic neurotransmission are central to the disorder. This hypothesis emerged primarily through the observation that N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) receptor antagonists, such as phencyclidine (PCP) and ketamine, can induce schizophrenia-like symptoms in healthy individuals. These drugs have been shown to provoke positive, negative, and cognitive symptoms akin to those observed in schizophrenia, implicating a critical role of NMDA receptors in the pathophysiology of the disorder [1-3].

At the core of the glutamatergic dysfunction theory is NMDA receptor hypofunction. This reduced receptor activity is believed to contribute to elevated levels of glutamate, leading to excitotoxicity, which can result in neuronal damage and cognitive decline [4,5]. Substantial evidence supports that reduced activity at NMDA receptors increases glutamate levels in the synaptic cleft, thereby exacerbating

excitotoxicity [4,6]. This aberration in glutamate signaling is posited to correlate with the neuroanatomical and functional abnormalities observed in schizophrenia, particularly in brain regions such as the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) and prefrontal cortex (PFC) [7,8].

Alterations in glutamatergic neurotransmission can also be reflected in changes to glutamate receptor subtypes. Research has identified selective alterations in ionotropic glutamate receptors, such as increased expression of AMPA and NMDA receptors in various brain regions of schizophrenia patients [9,10]. These changes are theorized to be compensatory responses aimed at counteracting diminished synaptic glutamate levels [9,10]. Additionally, genetic studies have pinpointed polymorphisms in glutamate receptor genes, including GRM7, as potential risk factors for schizophrenia, further supporting the role of glutamate signaling in its etiology [11,12].

In conjunction with NMDA receptor dysfunction, metabotropic glutamate receptors (mGluRs) have drawn attention for their role in modulating synaptic transmission and plasticity. Agonists targeting mGluR2 and mGluR3 have shown promise in preclinical models, with evidence indicating that such agonists can mitigate specific psychotic symptoms in animal models induced by NMDA receptor antagonists [13,14]. Additionally, the involvement of mGluRs in modulating dopamine release highlights their potential interaction with dopaminergic systems, which are also implicated in schizophrenia [15].

Research has consistently established a correlation between abnormal glutamate levels and the symptomatic dimensions of schizophrenia. Elevated levels of glutamine, a metabolite of glutamate, have been documented in chronic and first-episode psychosis, suggesting a complex interaction between these neurotransmitters and the clinical presentation of schizophrenia [3,16]. Studies utilizing proton magnetic resonance spectroscopy (MRS) have observed significant glutamate alterations across multiple brain regions, further underscoring the heterogeneous nature of glutamatergic dysregulation associated with the disorder [6,17].

Moreover, the integrity of glutamate transport systems, particularly excitatory amino acid transporters (EAATs), is critical for maintaining glutamate homeostasis in the brain. Dysfunction or reduced expression of these transporters has been observed in schizophrenia and is associated with hyperglutamatergic states, thereby contributing to excitotoxicity [18,19]. Such transporter dysregulation enhances synaptic glutamate concentrations, further contributing to the disturbance in glutamate signaling pathways associated with the disorder [19,20].

The anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), a region implicated in cognitive and emotional processing, exhibits significant glutamatergic abnormalities in schizophrenia. Studies indicate that patients have altered glutamate levels in the ACC, correlating with functional connections and neural activation during cognitive tasks [8,21]. This region's glutamatergic signaling may reflect broader circuits involved in the cognitive deficits observed in schizophrenia [6,17,22].

Additionally, the interaction between glutamate and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), the primary inhibitory neurotransmitter, is integral to understanding the glutamatergic theory of schizophrenia. NMDA receptor hypofunction may reduce GABAergic activity due to excitatory drive alterations on GABAergic interneurons, leading to further cognitive and emotional symptoms [5,23]. The balance between excitatory and inhibitory neurotransmission is crucial and may serve as a foundation for targeted therapeutic interventions.

Animal models have shed light on the physiological consequences of altered glutamate signaling. Mice deficient in specific glutamate transporters demonstrate behavioral phenotypes reflective of schizophrenia, including heightened locomotor activity and impaired social interaction [24]. Such findings highlight the multifaceted nature of glutamatergic signaling and support using these models for testing pharmacological interventions to recalibrate the glutamate-GABA balance in treating schizophrenia.

The abnormalities in glutamatergic neurotransmission highlight the potential for novel treatments targeting these systems. Compounds modulating the glutamatergic system, particularly through mGluR agonism, have garnered interest as potential adjuncts to conventional antipsychotics, aiming to improve both positive and negative symptom profiles while minimizing side effects associated with dopaminergic blockade [25-27].

Ultimately, while the complexity of schizophrenia's etiology necessitates a multifactorial approach, the glutamatergic system's role cannot be overstated. By understanding the nuances of how neurotransmitters and their receptors operate within the pathophysiology of schizophrenia, researchers and clinicians can advance toward more effective treatments and interventions that correspond with the disorder's biochemical underpinnings.

In conclusion, the involvement of neurotransmitters, particularly glutamate, and their receptors plays a critical role in the etiology of schizophrenia. NMDA receptor hypofunction, altered metabotropic receptor activity, impaired glutamate transport, and the intricate nexus between glutamate and GABAergic signaling all contribute to the neurobiological landscape of this debilitating disorder. This understanding not only elucidates the mechanisms underlying schizophrenia but also guides future research and pharmacotherapy strategies aimed at ameliorating its widespread effects on individuals affected by the disorder.

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