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Invited review

Neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptors serve as sensitive targets that mediate β-amyloid neurotoxicity[1]

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Key words

Abstract

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is the most common form of brain dementia characterized by the accumulation of β-amyloid peptides (Aβ) and loss of forebrain cholinergic neurons. Aβ accumulation and aggregation are thought to contribute to cholinergic neuronal degeneration, in turn causing learning and memory deficits, but the specific targets that mediate Aβ neurotoxicity remain elusive. Recently, accumulating lines of evidence have demonstrated that Aβ directly modulates the function of neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs), which leads to the new hypothesis that neuronal nAChRs may serve as important targets that mediate Aβ neurotoxicity. In this review, we summarize current studies performed in our laboratory and in others to address the question of how Aβ modulates neuronal nAChRs, especially nAChR subunit function.

Introduction

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a syndrome of dementia, characterized by gradual degeneration of basal forebrain cholinergic neurons innervating the cortex, amygdala and hippocampus, which manifests itself through difficulties in maintaining and sustaining attention, and profound cognitive impairments, such as loss of memory and the ability to learn[1–4]. These deficits are thought to be due to selective forebrain cholinergic neuronal degeneration[5]. Thus far, the mechanisms of selective cholinergic neuronal degeneration have been hypothesized to include the impairment of neuronal trophic support, disorders in glucose metabolism or other processes[6], but the precise mechanisms involved are still largely unclear. Recently, accumulating lines of evidence have shown that there is a crucial impairment of nicotinic acetylcholine receptor (nAChR) binding sites in the brain of AD patients[7,8]. β-amyloid peptides (Aβ) directly modulate nAChR function[9–13]. Nicotinic agents have been found to improve cognitive function in AD animal models and AD patients[14–17], suggesting that a relationship exists between nAChRs and Aβ. Therefore, the neuronal nAChR is likely to play an important role in mediating both Aβ toxic-ity and neural degeneration, and may serve as a therapeutic target for the treatment of AD.

Neuronal nAChRs

Structure and distribution of nAChRs in the central nervous system (CNS)

nAChRs are prototypical members of the ligand-gated ion channel superfamily of neurotransmitter receptors. nAChRs represent both classic and contemporary models for the establishment of concepts pertaining to mechanisms of drug action, synaptic transmission and structural/functional diversity of transmembrane signaling molecules[18–24]. nAChRs are found throughout the nervous system (eg in autonomic and sensory ganglia and the CNS), exist as multiple, diverse subtypes, and are pentamers composed of unique combinations from a family of at least 17 (α1–α10, β1–β4, γ, δ and ε) similar, but genetically-distinct, subunits. Each subunit gene has a unique promoter, even though some genes are clustered, suggesting a means for cell-specific expression. There are also unique protein sequence elements within each subunit, especially in the large, cytoplasmic loop, suggesting a differential post-translational control of sub-

unit trafficking. Most of these nAChR subtypes appear to exist as heteropentamers containing 2 or more different kinds of subunits. For example, heterologous expression studies suggest that α2, α3, α4 or α6 subunits can combine in a binary fashion with β2 or β4 subunits to form ligand-binding and/or functional nAChRs (eg α4β2-nAChRs). β3 and α5 subunits are 'wild-cards'. They are not able to form functional nAChRs on their own or with any other single type of subunit, but they are capable of integrating into complexes with 2 or more other subunit types to form distinctive trinary or ternary (that also contain more than one of the α2–α4, α6, β2 or β4 subunits found in binary complexes) complexes such as the α4β2α5-nAChR or the α3β2β4α5-nAChR (which is naturally expressed). In contrast, phylogenetically-ancient nAChR α7 subunits are able to form functional homopentamers, which constitute the simplest possible prototype for a ligand-gated ion channel. nAChRs containing α7 subunits (α7-nAChR) or α4 and β2 subunits (α4β2*-nAChR) are the most abundant curaremimetic neurotoxin-binding and high affinity nicotine-binding nAChR in the brain. However, other less-abundant nAChRs (eg α3*-nAChR or α6*-nAChR) exist and may also play important roles in brain physiological regulation.

Function of neuronal nAChRs

nAChR function in vertebrate muscle has been comprehensively characterized, and studies of functional nAChRs in autonomic ganglia are rather advanced[23,24]. In regards to nAChRs found centrally, there has been heavy reliance on heterologous expression studies, principally using oocytes as hosts, but the use of transfected mammalian cells has also assisted in defining the realm of possibilities for nAChR subunit compositions that are capable of forming functional, ligand-gated ion channels. Significant insights have been gained about functional nAChRs in the brain from a substantial body of evidence derived using electrophysiological recordings, neurotransmitter release analyses, isotopic ion flux studies and internal calcium ion imaging. Studies using transgenic mice have helped to identify subunits that constitute some native, functional nAChR subtypes[25–30]. Taken collectively, recent findings have indicated that nAChRs in the brain play roles not only in the mediation of classic, excitatory, cholinergic neurotransmission at selected loci, but also and perhaps more globally, in the modulation of neurotransmission of other chemical messengers, including glutamate, γ-aminobutyric acid (GABA), the monoamines dopamine (DA), norepinephrine, serotonin and ACh itself[23,31–33]. This means that some nAChR subtypes have post-synaptic (or peri-synaptic) somatodendritic locali-

zations, whereas others have pre-synaptic dispositions. Moreover, some nAChRs have been implicated in processes such as the structuring and maintenance of neurites and synapses[34–36] and even in the modulation of neuronal viability and/or death[37–40]. Therefore, nAChRs play complex and interesting roles in the modulation of chemical milieu in the brain, for the completion of neuronal circuits, and perhaps for the formation and maintenance of synapses. However, more work is required to define functional nAChRs in the CNS and to determine their cellular distributions. Additional studies are also required to determine whether distinctive subunit combinations dictate whether a given nAChR subtype will be positioned pre- or post-synaptically or whether the same nAChR subtype can have either disposition depending on the cellular environment.

As examples, functional nAChRs in the hippocampus, in neurons of the mesocorticolimbic DA system, including the ventral tegmental area (VTA) and substantia nigra pars compacta (SNc), or in forebrain cholinergic neurons, have received attention[41–46]. Some of these functional analyses utilized electrophysiological recordings from brain slices as well as primary cultured hippocampal neurons. Recent exceptions include studies demonstrating the expression in the VTA of functionally distinct nAChRs, including homomeric α7-nAChRs, which are expressed on less than one-half of VTA DAergic neurons, and a variety of non-α7-nAChRs, provisionally identified as $\alpha4\alpha6\alpha5(\beta2)_2$-, $\alpha4\alpha5(\beta2)_2$-, α6β2-, and α4β2-nAChRs[26,47,48]. One complication is that the function of some of these putative subtypes has not been convincingly demonstrated, leaving open the possibility that the immunoisolates are not functional nAChRs found on the cell membrane. Interestingly, GABAergic neurons located in the VTA are likely to express relatively simple nAChR subtypes, mainly the α4β2-nAChR, since less than 25% of GABAergic neurons express α3, α5, α6 and β4 subunits[26]. Recently, several research groups have focused their attention on nAChR function in forebrain neurons[49–51] and have found that these nAChRs not only participate in forebrain neuronal function, but are also modulated by Aβ[52]. The diversity in the expression of nAChR subtypes and subunits on different types of neurons located in different brain regions might be the rule more than the exception for other brain regions, but more work is needed before definitive conclusions can be drawn.

Neuronal nAChR changes in AD

The roles of nAChRs in cognitive function and development are well documented[53,54]. Impaired cognition found in AD patients is believed to be correlated with forebrain cho-

linergic neural degeneration[55,56], and the cholinergic system has been postulated to be the primary target in AD[57,58]. Molecular and neurochemical evidence have indicated that changes in nAChR subtypes occur in the brain of AD patients. Evidence also indicates that a consistent, significant loss of α4-containing nAChRs occurs in a number of neocortical areas and in the hippocampus of patients with AD[59,60]. Cortical α4*-nAChR deficits are significantly correlated with cognitive impairment in AD patients[61,62]. For example, by measuring the binding of specific radiolabeled ligands, such as [^{3}H]epibatidine and [^{125}I]α-bungarotoxin to reflect receptor numbers, a reduction in α4- and α7-nAChR binding sites was found to be associated with AD. On the other hand, the numbers of binding sites reflective of the α4 subtype were significantly elevated in individuals who were habitual smokers[63–65]. However, mRNA levels of different nAChR subtypes, measured either by *in situ* hybridization or quantitative RT-PCR, were not different when controls and patients with AD were compared[66,67]. At the protein level, α3 and α4 subunit expression in the temporal cortex and hippocampus, and α7 subunit expression in the hippocampus, were significantly lower in AD patients compared to controls[66,68]. Immunohistochemical analyses have shown a significant reduction in the α4 subunit, but not the α7 or α3 subunits, in the brain of AD patients following autopsy compared to age-matched samples[63,69,70]. In summary, the above data suggest that there is a reduction in the number of nAChR binding sites in the brain of patients with AD at the protein level, but not the mRNA level, which implies that the reduction is likely to be due to nAChR post-translational malfunction.

Aβ peptides and neurotoxicity
Aβ and senile plaques

Plaques are defining neuropathological hallmarks of AD and Aβ, the major constituent of plaques, is considered to play an important role in the pathophysiology of AD. Clinical evidence indicates that amyloid plaques are responsible for the pathogenesis of AD[5]. These plaques are mainly composed of the Aβ peptide, which is obtained from an amyloid precursor protein (APP) by proteolytic cleavage and exists in 2 predominant forms: the 40-residue Aβ_{1-40} and the 42-residue Aβ_{1-42}. Aβ_{1-40} represents the majority of the Aβ population in normal individuals[25] and Aβ_{1-42}, which exhibits trophic and toxic effects on neurons[5,71], appears to induce the pathogenesis of AD.

Aβ accumulation in AD: *in vivo* and *in vitro* studies

A large body of evidence indicates that the accumulation of large intracellular and extracellular aggregates is a histopathological hallmark for the terminal diagnosis of AD. However, it has long been known that the extent of amyloid accumulation does not correlate well with AD pathogenesis[72] and that a significant number of individuals who have not suffered dementia have also shown notable amounts of amyloid plaques. Among *in vivo* transgenic animals and *in vitro* cell culture models, pathological changes are frequently observed prior to the onset of amyloid accumulation. These seemingly conflicting lines of evidence can be reconciled by postulating that soluble Aβ, rather than the mature fibrils, represents the primary toxic species in amyloid-associated degenerative disease[73,74]. In AD patients, soluble Aβ correlates better with cognitive decline and loss of synaptic proteins than insoluble, fibril deposits[75,76]. In APP transgenic mouse models, neurological deficits precede the deposition of significant amounts of Aβ, suggesting that the pathophysiology of AD occurs prior to amyloid fibril deposition[77,78].

On the other hand, evidence has also shown heterogeneity in extracellular amyloid in plaques[79]. Contrary to the popularized dogma that all amyloid plaques arise from extracellular deposition, the different forms and magnitudes of amyloid plaques could be the result of multiple mechanisms of formation. For example, it has been proposed that diffuse and dense-core (senile) amyloid plaques differ with respect to glial activity, with the latter primarily being associated with highly reactive microglia[80]. The popular story of extracellular amyloid aggregation which fails to account for the observed heterogeneity in plaques and detected intracellular Aβ together attract more attention to the mechanisms and intracellular aspects of Aβ plaque formation.

Aβ is neurotoxic

The addition of Aβ to cell cultures causes a rapid and large increase in intracellular Ca^{2+}, whereas equivalent amounts of soluble monomer and fibrils have no detectable effects[29,30]. Moreover, Aβ specifically permeabilizes cell membranes. The Ca^{2+} influx is not blocked by cobalt, indicating that the effect is not due to the activation of existing Ca^{2+} channels. Aβ also causes leakage of the membrane impermeant dye calcein from cells, indicating that a variety of molecules diffuse across the membrane following Aβ treatment. This conclusion is in agreement with previous studies that reported that Aβ induced the release of dye from phospholipid vesicles[81,82]. It has also been observed in cell cultures that Aβ treatment results in an increase in cytosolic Ca^{2+} in Ca^{2+}-free medium. This increase can be

largely eliminated by pre-treatment with thapsigargin, which depletes endoplasmic reticulum calcium stores[83], suggesting that external application of Aβ leads to the liberation of Ca^{2+} from intracellular stores. This is consistent with reports that Aβ may penetrate into cells and disrupt intracellular membranes, causing leakage of sequestered Ca^{2+}, but it could also be the consequence of altered intracellular signaling[84]. Under *in vivo* conditions, the chronic leakage of ions across the plasma membrane may be sufficient to disrupt normal neuronal function and serve as a source of chronic stress that may impair the maintenance of normal membrane potential.

In addition to Ca^{2+} channel activity, Aβ also seems to activate K^+ channels. The mechanism by which Aβ increases K^+ current, which results in ensuing neurotoxicity, is unknown, but oxidative stress may be a factor[85,86].

In summary, studies using both *in vivo* and *in vitro* preparations indicate that Aβ is neurotoxic and plays a direct role in the pathogenesis of AD.

Aβ modulates nAChRs
Conflicting results

Recent evidence has indicated that nAChRs serve as central targets for Aβ-induced neurotoxic manifestations such as cholinergic hypofunction and cognitive impairment. However, the action of Aβ on nAChRs is not straightforward and there are several discrepancies among different research groups. Some experiments using *in vitro* preparations suggest that Aβ acts as a nAChR agonist. For example, $Aβ_{1-42}$ has been shown to activate α7-nAChRs expressed in *Xenopus* oocytes[11] and native non-α7-nAChRs in acutely dissociated rat basal forebrain neurons[52]. Using isolated pre-synaptic nerve endings from rat hippocampus and neocortex combined with confocal Ca^{2+} imaging, $Aβ_{1-42}$ was found to directly evoke a sustained increase in pre-synaptic Ca^{2+} levels via nAChRs[87]. This action seemed to involve both α7- and non-α7-nAChRs. On the other hand, other groups, including our laboratory, have shown evidence that Aβ acts on nAChRs as an antagonist. $Aβ_{1-42}$ was shown to block native α7-containing nAChRs in cultured rat hippocampal neurons[10], human α7-nAChRs in *Xenopus* oocytes[88], rat α4β2-nAChRs in *Xenopus* oocytes[89], human α4β2-nAChRs in human SH-EP1 cells[90], mouse muscle nAChRs in human kidney BOSC 23 cells[88], Torpedo nAChRs in *Xenopus* oocytes[89] and non-α7-nAChRs, including α2β2-, α4β2- and α4α5β2-nAChRs in *Xenopus* oocytes[12]. Recently, a specific model of interaction between Aβ and nAChRs was postulated[31,32]. In addition, a specially designed peptide that binds to Aβ with high affinity has been reported, and interestingly, this peptide virtually abolishes

Aβ-induced nAChR inhibition[91]. Therefore, although there are some inconsistencies about the effects of Aβ, which may be explained by the different preparations of Aβ used on different subtypes of nAChRs by different groups, all of the above-mentioned studies prove that Aβ interacts with nAChRs.

Aβ modulates nAChRs: possible mechanisms

There are 2 main features of AD: Aβ protein deposition and severe cholinergic neuronal deficits. Aβ is a 39- to 43-amino acid transmembrane fragment of a large precursor molecule and is found in diffuse and focal deposits throughout the brain in AD patients. It has been shown that the Aβ protein is a major constituent of senile plaque, a neuropathological hallmark of AD and a neurotoxin in various *in vivo* and *in vitro* studies. Although the mechanisms by which Aβ causes cholinergic neuronal degeneration are not fully understood, a few hypotheses have been proposed based on current, growing evidence: (1) neuronal death, either by apoptosis or necrosis, primarily occurs in the cholinergic system; (2) insertion of Aβ proteins into the cell membrane destabilizes the membrane and affects its fluidity[92-94]; (3) Aβ affects intracellular Ca^{2+} homeostasis through either the production of cation ionophores or activation of ligand- and/or voltage-gated channels[95,96], and (4) Aβ affects nAChR function probably through oxidative processes[97,98]. Until now, the precise mechanisms by which Aβ selectively induces degeneration of forebrain cholinergic neurons in AD patients have been unclear.

Aβ modulates nAChRs: homomeric α7-nAChRs

Among nAChRs, the α7 subtype may play the most important role in mediating the toxicity of Aβ. $Aβ_{1-42}$ binds to α7-nAChRs with a higher affinity compared to $Aβ_{1-40}$[99]. Therefore, it has been suggested that chronic stimulation of α7-nAChRs by Aβ, mainly by $Aβ_{1-42}$[11], elevates, at least in part, intracellular Ca^{2+} levels. It is also involved in the chronic activation of the extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK_2) isoform of the ERK mitogen-activated protein kinase (MAPK) cascade which leads to the downregulation of MAPK[100]. The ERK_2-MAPK signaling pathway plays a critical role in memory formation[29], and its derangement could in part explain the memory impairment observed in patients with AD. Moreover, it has been proposed that downregulation of ERK_2-MAPK may be the initial step of a positive-feedback loop that results in Aβ accumulation[100,101]. There is also another explanation implicating the α7-nAChR[102]. Using *in vitro* preparations, the binding interaction between $Aβ_{1-42}$,

but not $A\beta_{1-40}$, and α7-nAChRs facilitates internalization and intracellular accumulation of $A\beta_{1-42}$[102]. Immunohistochemistry and digital imaging studies have revealed that neurons in the brain of AD patients which contain substantial intracellular accumulation of $A\beta_{1-42}$ invariably express relatively high levels of α7-nAChRs[102,103]. Furthermore, these studies prove the high co-localization of α7-nAChRs and $A\beta_{1-42}$ within neurons of AD brains. Michael *et al* introduced a new hypothesis referring to the co-localization of α7-nAChRs and $A\beta_{1-42}$. They suggested that amyloid plaques may derive from the lysis of forebrain neurons that are overburdened with intracellular accumulation of the α7-nAChR/$A\beta_{1-42}$ complex, which challenged the prevailing amyloid accumulation story[102,103]. This provides a reasonable explanation for $A\beta_{1-42}$ causing a reduction in the cell surface-associated α7-nAChR by a relocation of this receptor to intracellular $A\beta_{1-42}$-positive deposits. This reduction results in the intracellular derangement of calcium cascade, which in turn leads to selective degeneration of cholinergic and cholinoceptive neurons in AD brains.

Another consequence of the interaction between $A\beta$ and α7-nAChRs would be a derangement of the GABA system, which plays a role in long-term potentiation and learning[104]. α7-nAChRs, located on GABAergic interneurons, modulate GABA release, and chronic stimulation of α7-nAChRs would modify GABAergic signaling. Taking these results into consideration, compounds that are able to block the effects of $A\beta$ on α7-nAChR function may possibly be used as therapeutic agents for AD. Moreover, the mechanisms of $A\beta$-induced damage implicating nAChRs have also been proposed to be involved in the glutamatergic system[104]. By inhibiting glutamate re-uptake by astrocytes, $A\beta$ would promote excessive glutamate stimulation. Glutamate induces an increase in intracellular Ca^{2+} levels via activation of *N*-methyl-*D*-aspartate (NMDA) receptors. This influx of Ca^{2+} activates nitric oxide (NO) synthase and leads to the production of toxic oxygen radicals and cell death[34]. It has also been reported that α7-nAChR stimulation would promote anti-apoptotic protein synthesis via elevation of intracellular Ca^{2+} levels and activation of phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase and Akt kinase[105]. These results suggest that α7-nAChR stimulation could be used as a neuroprotective therapy, which could provide the most benefit to patients with AD if the disease is diagnosed in the early stages of development. The above-mentioned different mechanisms suggest that the consequences of α7-nAChR activation, desensitization or inactivation by $A\beta_{1-42}$ or nAChR agonists, such as nicotine, on AD development are complex or even exhibit opposite effects, suggesting that $A\beta$ modulation of nAChR function

is indeed complicated.

$A\beta$ modulates nAChRs: non-α7-nAChRs

A significant decrease in the number of radioligand binding sites corresponding to nAChRs, especially α4-containing nAChRs, is one of the earliest events in the pathogenesis of AD[106], even preceding cholinergic neuronal degeneration. Further support for the cholinergic hypothesis of AD comes from observations that nicotine improves cognitive function in AD patients[107]. Accumulating data also indicates that $A\beta_{1-42}$ can block non-α7-nAChRs in various neurons or cell lines[92,93].

It has been reported that $A\beta$ can directly modulate α4β2-nAChR function[92,93], which is the most abundant non-7-nAChR subtype in the brain of vertebrates[60,108,109]. Our data have shown that $A\beta_{1-42}$, at a pathology-relevant concentration (1 nmol/L), can inhibit the human α4β2-nAChR (hα4β2-nAChR) heterologously expressed in human SH-EP1 cells. $A\beta_{1-42}$-mediated inhibition of hα4β2-nAChR function is non-competitive, voltage-independent and use-independent. This downregulation of hα4β2-nAChR function by $A\beta_{1-42}$ has been confirmed to not be mediated by nAChR internalization[90]. In addition, we have demonstrated that there is no competition between $A\beta_{1-42}$, at picomolar to micromolar concentrations, and nAChR agonists based on radioligand binding sites using heterologously expressed hα4β2- or hα7-nAChRs. Therefore, our findings indicate that $A\beta_{1-42}$ likely acts as a non-competitive antagonist of hα4β2-nAChRs[90].

In *Xenopus* oocytes expressing various non-α7-nAChRs, including α4β2-nAChRs, $A\beta_{1-42}$ can reversibly block membrane currents induced by carbachol. More interestingly, altering the α4:β2 RNA ratio of α4β2-nAChRs alters the sensitivity of nAChRs to $A\beta_{1-42}$. In other words, increasing the relative amount of the α4 subunit significantly decreases the sensitivity of α4β2 channels to $A\beta_{1-42}$, which suggests that the relative block by $A\beta_{1-42}$ is affected by the stoichiometry of α4β2 channels[12]. Numerous studies have revealed that $A\beta_{1-42}$ regulates the function of non-α7-nAChRs. However, links between losses in nAChRs, cholinergic neuronal degeneration and the effects of $A\beta$ have been elusive.

Histological studies showing co-expression of nAChR α7 and β2 subunits in most forebrain cholinergic neurons[111], and heterologous expression work indicating that nAChR α7 and β2 subunits can come together to form heteromeric functional channels[112], suggest that although most α7-nAChRs are formed as homomeric pentamers, others may exist as heteromers, including a possible α7β2-nAChR subtype. However, the expression of functional α7β2-

nAChRs in forebrain cholinergic neurons has not been demonstrated and their sensitivity to Aβ has not been determined.

The predominant clinical syndrome associated with AD is a deficiency in both learning and memory capabilities. These deficits are thought to be due to selective forebrain cholinergic neuronal degeneration. Although this selective cholinergic neurodegeneration is largely unclear, several hypotheses have been postulated, including Aβ-induced toxicity, impairment of neuronal trophic support, disorders in glucose metabolism or other processes[113]. The accumu-

lation and aggregation of the Aβ protein in diffuse neuritic plaques is a key pathological hallmark of AD. Aβ accumulation is thought to contribute to cholinergic neuronal degeneration, in turn causing learning and memory deficits[114]. Evidence indicates that Aβ harms central neurons by affecting cellular Ca^{2+} homeostasis, neurotransmission, neuronal signaling and receptor/ion channel functions[115]. However, most of the relevant experiments have been done using Aβ at concentrations ranging between 100 nmol/L and 10 μmol/L, which are much higher than Aβ concentrations (<5 nmol/L)
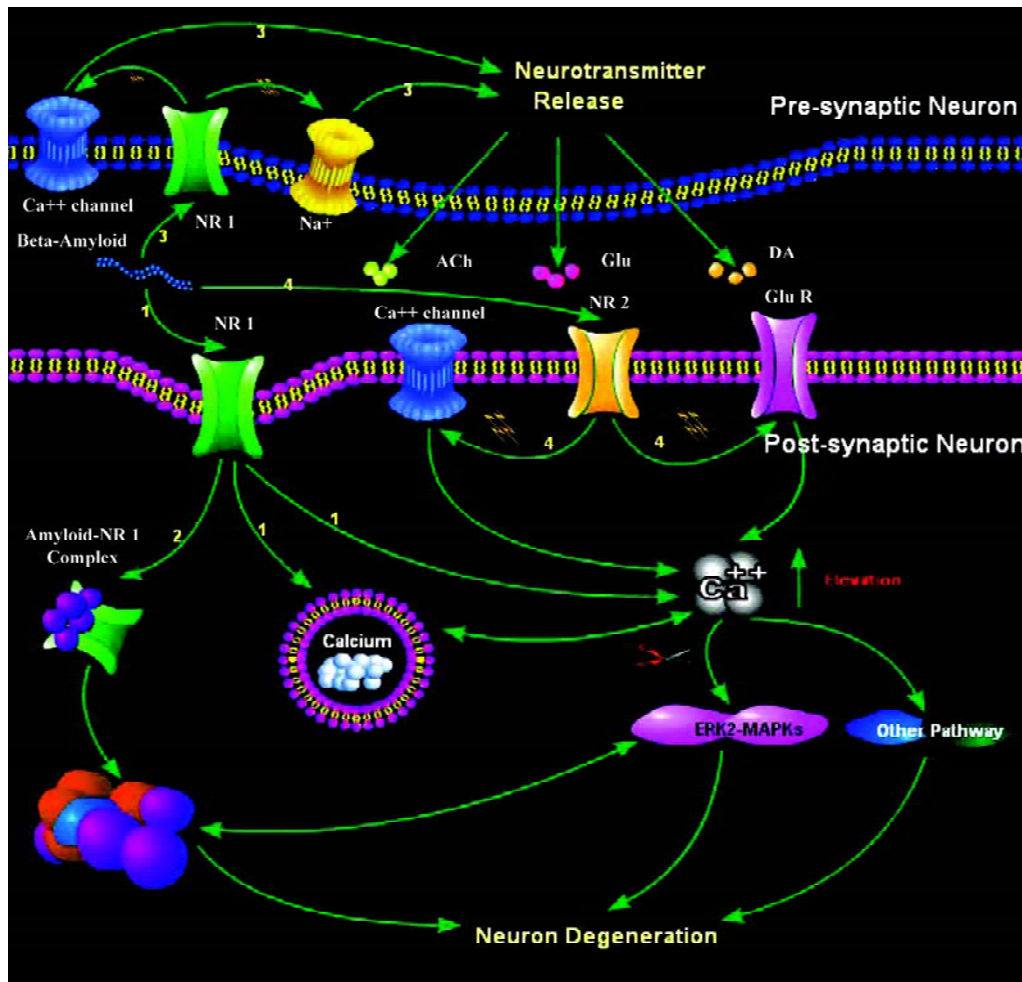

Figure 1. Roles of nAChRs in mediating Aβ toxicity. NR1: α7-nAChRs; and NR2: non-α7-nAChRs; ER: endoplasmic reticulum[105–107]. Soluble Aβ$_{1-42}$ accumulation: (1) activates α7-nAChRs and induces Ca^{2+} influx though this receptor and increases Ca^{2+} release from intracellular Ca^{2+} pools (ER), which together elevate intracellular Ca^{2+} concentrations; (2) intracellular α7-nAChRs combine with Aβ (co-localization) which favors intracellular plaque formation; (3) Aβ activates pre-synaptic α7-nAChRs located on glutamatergic terminals and increases glutamate release, then activates ionotropic glutamate receptor and leads to Ca^{2+} influx via both the NMDA receptor and voltage-gated Ca^{2+} channels; and (4) Aβ suppresses non-α7-nAChRs and causes receptor upregulation. These higher expressed non-α7-nAChRs (mostly α4β2-nAChRs) can be activated by endogenous ACh which leads to the depolarization of the membrane potential, and also leads to Ca^{2+} influx via both the NMDA receptor and voltage-gated Ca^{2+} channels. Together, Aβ acts on neuronal nAChRs and directly and/or indirectly elevates intracellular Ca^{2+} concentrations, which triggers neuronal degeneration through Ca^{2+}-dependent signal cascades.

found in the brain of patients with AD[116,117]. Moreover, the effects of Aβ have been examined in a variety of cell types that may not be appropriate models to characterize the selective effects of Aβ on native forebrain cholinergic neurons.

Figure 1 summarizes the roles of neuronal nAChRs in mediating Aβ-induced neuronal degeneration.

Conclusion

A marked reduction in the number of nAChRs is one of the major neurochemical features of AD in disease-relevant brain regions such as the cortex and hippocampus. This loss is accompanied by a deficiency in the number of forebrain cholinergic neurons, which contributes to the development of cognitive dysfunction. The precise mechanisms that underlie these losses are not yet fully defined. Further development of transgenic models recapitulating these important neurochemical characteristics may help to resolve these issues. Additional major challenges include understanding why aberrant Aβ accumulation occurs, determining if accumulating Aβ is indeed toxic and identifying the precise molecular mechanisms leading to synaptic dysfunction and neuronal degeneration. Such knowledge will help to identify and/or develop novel compounds that can restore cholinergic system function in patients with AD.

Acknowledgement

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