

Review Article

**Stress and the glymphatic system**

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**Keywords:** glymphatic system, stress, PNEI, immune system

*List of abbreviations:*

PNEI - psychoneuroendocrinoimmunology

CNS - Central nervous system

CSF - Cerebrospinal Fluid

AQP4 - Aquaporin-4

HPA - hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal

AD - Alzheimer's disease

PD - Parkinson's disease

A $\beta$  - Amyloid beta

TBI - Traumatic brain injury

NE - norepinephrine

SAH - Subarachnoid hemorrhage

REM – rapid eye movement

## **1. Summary**

**Background:** Psychoneuroendocrinoimmunology (PNEI) is an integrative discipline studying the processes by which mental events modulate immune functions and how the immune system in turn can alter brain function. The central nervous system (CNS) is the only system in the body lacking its own anatomically defined lymphatic vessels. The glymphatic system is an adaptation mechanism developed by the CNS for fluid balance and waste clearance. Prolonged exposure to stress – chronic stress, can be detrimental for the functioning of the central nervous system and the glymphatic system.

**Methods:** Electronic databases including PubMed/MEDLINE, Google Scholar, and Scopus were searched for original articles examining stress and its effects on the glymphatic system.

**Results:** Numerous everyday situations can be defined as “stressful” – work environment, exams, physical and psychological stress due to illness, trauma, etc. The body’s response to stress is a combination of adjustments known as “fight-flight-freeze” response – hormonal and physiologic changes helping the body fight a threat or flee to safety. Increase in stress is associated with impaired sleep and considering that the brain’s waste clearing system is shown to be active during sleep, it can be suggested that this is a mechanism in which stress affects glymphatic function.

**Conclusion:** The research on the impact of stress on the glymphatic function is still lacking, but there are clear indications that researching the topic is valuable. It is

promising to evaluate if through stress management there can be an improvement in waste-clearing in the brain and the prognosis of diseases characterized by accumulation of metabolites.

## **2. Introduction**

The central nervous system is the only system in the body that does not have its own anatomically defined lymphatic vessels [1] but has developed one of a kind adaptation mechanism to keep fluid balance and remove interstitial waste. In 2013, Nedergaard [2] discovered the glymphatic system, which is a waste clearance system, consisting of astroglia cells that form perivascular tunnels, promoting the elimination of soluble proteins, metabolic waste products and the distribution of glucose, lipids, neuromodulators, amino acids and growth factors in the brain [2]. Since the discovery of this pathway, significant research has been done to further analyze its physiological function and also explore its role in several diseases [3].

What this article will focus on is the role of stress on the brain. In a medical or biological context stress is a physical, mental, or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension. The brain is the main organ that plays a role in the physiological and behavioral responses to stressful agents and whether their effect is promoting or damaging to overall health. Changes in the brain when exposed to stressors lead to changes in metabolic, cardiovascular and immune systems of the body and determine the short- and long-term effects of stress [4]. The intimate mechanisms of changes in the glymphatic system when exposed to chronic stress are to be of interest because of the vital role of the brain waste clearance pathway in the riddance

of substances that accumulate and lead to neurodegenerative diseases including Alzheimer's disease, which is characterized by the accumulation of proteins, including amyloid plaques and tau tangles [5,6,7].

### **3. Aims of the review**

This paper aims to understand better the connection between the glymphatic system and stress.

### **4. Methods**

We have searched online libraries, including PubMed/MEDLINE, Google Scholar, and Scopus. The main search terms were “Glymphatic System” [MeSH] or “glymphatic system” [MeSH] and “stress” [MeSH] and “sleep”, and “brain” [MeSH] with filters activated, namely publication date from 01/01/1990 to 31/12/2019 and papers written in English.

### **5. Discussion**

#### **5.1. Glymphatic pathway-the waste cleaning system in CNS**

Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) and the interstitial fluid in the brain are in constant communication. The facilitation of this connection is by convective influx of cerebrospinal fluid through the periarterial space [8]. From the subarachnoid space CSF follows the low resistance pathway until it reaches the dense brain parenchyma, where it is transported by Aquaporin-4 (AQP4) water channels that are in the astrocytic end feet around the brain vessels [8]. With the passage of CSF through the parenchyma, interstitial fluid fluxes toward the perivenous spaces around the

large deep veins and drains out of the brain, reaching cervical lymphatic vessels [9]. This system that drives interchange of cerebrospinal fluid and interstitial fluid in the brain is the glymphatic system [2]. Originally in 2012, Illif et al. with the use of two-photon imaging of small fluorescent tracers demonstrate that interchange and characterize the dynamics of the glymphatic system [8]. Further research conducted with fluorescent-tagged amyloid  $\beta$ , pathogenic peptide in Alzheimer's disease, which was transported along this route, suggests that the glymphatic pathway is a waste clearing system in the CNS [8]. Later these characteristics were well established by several articles [10,11]. In addition to amyloid  $\beta$ , other suggested metabolites and solutes, cleared by the system are lactate [12] and tau proteins [13]. As well as functioning as an interstitial waste clearance system, the glymphatic system is involved in transport of nutrients [14], apolipoprotein E, signaling molecules, small lipid molecules [15,16]. Other literature suggests the involvement of the glymphatic system in the brain circulation of neuromodulators, growth factors, carrier proteins and other nutrients [17].

Having in mind the numerous ways in which the glymphatic system effects deposition and distribution of solutes and metabolites in the CNS, it can be suggested the proper function of this pathway is key for normal functioning of the brain. As a particular interest of this review article is the effect of stress on the glymphatic system. There is a number of studies looking into the effects of traumatic brain injury [18], aging [19] and other diseases in relation to the glymphatic system. However, the link between chronic stress and the glymphatic function and the

mechanism of this interaction have not fully been unraveled. Significant contribution to the matter has been the study of Wei et al. which concluded that chronic stress could impair the AQP4-mediated glymphatic transport in the brain through glucocorticoid signaling [20].

## **5.2. The effect of glucocorticoids on the brain physiology**

Glucocorticoids, mainly the so called “stress hormone” cortisol, are secreted as a result of the activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) axis in response to stressors [21]. While when the body reacts to an acute stressor, acting for a short period of time, the secretion of cortisol is effective in restoring the homeostasis of the body, the prolonged exposure to stress – chronic stress, can be detrimental for the proper functioning of the central nervous system [22]. Numerous publications have studied the effect of glucocorticoids on the brain physiology. McEwan has stated that glucocorticoids alter neuronal architecture by causing dendritic retraction or expansion and decreased or increased synapse density [23]. GCs are reported to inhibit local cerebral glucose utilization in the brain [24] and inhibit glucose transport in neurons, glia, and endothelial cells in vitro [25, 26]. Prolonged exposure to stress has also been reported to lead to hippocampal atrophy, cause neuron loss [27], as well as disrupt memory [28] and suppress appetite [29]. As stated above the effect of chronic stress and stress hormones on the glymphatic system has not been evaluated extensively, but Wei et al.’s research clearly indicates that it is through glucocorticoid signaling that the AQP4-mediated glymphatic transport could be impaired [20].

Other conclusions about the link between stress and impaired glymphatic function can be derived by the evidence showing that there is an association between stress and alcohol addiction [30] and there is also evidence that chronic 1.5 g/kg ethanol intake induces reactive gliosis and perturbs glymphatic function [31]. The brain's waste clearing system is shown to be active during sleep [32], and having in mind that increase in stress is associated with impaired sleep [33, 34], it can be suggested that this is another mechanism in which stress affects the glymphatic system. But there is still need for more extensive research and in depth look at this association.

### **5.3. Functioning of the glymphatic system under the effects of stress**

In the modern setting we live in, one is exposed to various situations that disturb the counterbalance of the organism as a whole and its environment. In the everyday life of a modern human, there are many situations that can be defined as “stressful” – work environment, exams, physical and psychological stress due to illness, trauma and other medical conditions. The body's response to stress is a combination of adjustments known as “fight-flight-freeze” response [35]. In its essence this response is an array of hormonal, physiologic changes designed to help the body fight a threat or flee to safety [36]. Years of research has also characterized the long-term effects of chronic stress on overall health [37]. Chronic stress has been shown to contribute to increase in blood pressure [38] atherosclerosis [39], obesity – directly or indirectly by reducing sleep and exercise [40] and brain alterations connected to depression [41] addiction [42], anxiety [43].

Although there has been extensive research on the impact of stress throughout different systems of the body, the effect of chronic stress on the glymphatic system particularly remains largely uncharted. As observed earlier in this paper the research of Wei et al. shows that chronic stress impairs the AQP4-mediated global glymphatic transport in the CNS, accompanied by decreased expression and polarization of AQP4, reduced transcription of AQP4, agrin, laminin, and dystroglycan [20]. The scarcity of the literature concerning the matter, prompts for a different approach to further evaluate the association of stress and the glymphatic system's functionality.

#### **5.4. The role of sleep on the glymphatic system**

Very particular characteristic of the glymphatic system's intimate working mechanism was analyzed by Xie et al. in 2013 [32]. Their findings suggested that sleep was associated with dramatically enhanced glymphatic clearance, which was suppressed in awake state [32]. By in-vivo 2-photon imaging of the brain's waste clearance system, it was seen that compared to anesthetized mice, the CSF influx was reduced by 90% during wakefulness [32]. The findings were similar when the same experiment was performed with mice, that were in a natural sleeping state [32]. Xie et al.'s observations indicate that the sleeping state is conducive to convective fluid flux and by that to the clearance of metabolites in the brain parenchyma, uncovering a major aspect of the functioning of the glymphatic system – it is turned on during sleep and it clears the waste products produced during the awake state of the brain [2]. Considering that the neuromodulator of the state of arousal is



norepinephrine [44], Jessen et al. suggest that it is also a key regulator of glymphatic activity, and it may be responsible for the suppression of the system during wakefulness [2]. Other studies have also stated that the glymphatic clearance is dependent on the activity of noradrenergic receptors, found to be major regulators of sleep and wakefulness [45]. In a different study, through MRI imaging, it was found that the position of the head during sleep also improved clearance of interstitial solute [46].

Several studies have looked into the close relation of stress and impaired sleep. Stress has been associated with shortened sleep, fragmentation and possible reduction of sleep stages 3 and 4 [47], and impaired sleep has been shown to increase levels of stress markers such as cortisol, which can lead to worsening effects of stress [47]. When this is taken into account, insufficient glymphatic function can be expected in every situation and state that is characterized with sleep impairment, arising from exposure to chronic stress.

### **5.5. Glymphatic system and somatic diseases**

The glymphatic drainage of metabolites and solutes can be classified as important for the onset and progression for a number of diseases. There is substantial evidence that neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease (AD) and Parkinson's disease (PD), are characterized by intracellular and/or extracellular accumulation of misfolded proteins and selective neuronal death in a progressive manner [48, 49]. There are indications that the glymphatic system is suppressed in number of other diseases – e.g. traumatic brain injury (TBI) and

ischemic and hemorrhagic stroke, and that suppression of glymphatic function might further contribute to the pathophysiological mechanisms seen in these diseases [2].

In Alzheimer's disease (AD) the extracellular amyloid beta ( $A\beta$ ) deposits are the fundamental cause of the disease [50]. Reduced glymphatic influx and clearance of  $A\beta$  were found in a mouse model of AD [51], and pretreatment of mice with  $A\beta$  was shown to lead to significant suppression of CSF influx, suggesting that Alzheimer's disease leads to impaired glymphatic clearance and accumulation of  $A\beta$ , which will worsen glymphatic function even further [51]. Moreover, Zuroff et al. argued that in late-onset AD,  $A\beta$  accumulation is due to defective clearance, rather than overproduction [52]. Age-associated decline in glymphatic influx and interstitial solute clearance, such as  $A\beta$ , is attributed to reduced penetration of arterial pulsations in the aging brain [17], thus clearance of  $A\beta$  was shown to get worse with age [51], so age-related risk factors would potentially worsen  $A\beta$  metabolism [53]. The increase of norepinephrine (NE) in CSF in the elderly [54] would hypothetically also result in reduced glymphatic activity and impaired removal of  $A\beta$  and tau-proteins [55], which would accelerate AD progression [10]. Musiek et al. [56] suggest that sleep disturbances might also precede symptom onset in AD and may drive disease pathology, as well as be a consequence of the disease, which correlates with the notion that the brain's waste clearing system is active during sleep, rather than in awake state [32, 57, 58]. The finding of a significant reduction in glymphatic transport before deposition of  $A\beta$  in the APP/PS1 mouse model of AD [51], suggests that AD onset might even be postponed by early restoration of glymphatic flow.

Traumatic brain injury (TBI), which is an established risk factor for the early development of dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, is frequently characterized by neurofibrillary tangles of aggregated tau-protein [13]. Illif et al.'s research [13] indicates that after TBI, glymphatic function is reduced by as much as 60%, which persists for at least a month after the injury. Knock-out of the AQP4-water channel gene further exacerbates worsening of glymphatic function after TBI and facilitates the development of aggregates of tau-protein, leading to neurodegeneration in the post-traumatic brain [13]. The glymphatic system's damage, following TBI could be contributed to re-localization of AQP4 channels away from astrocytic end feet [18]. There are papers suggesting that changes in glymphatic function after TBI, as well as post-traumatic sleep disruption and the following damage to the clearance of neuropeptides may be involved in the pathogenesis of headaches following traumatic injuries [59]. The chronic disruption of the glymphatic system's working mechanism is looked at as a potential link between repetitive TBI and neurodegeneration [18].

Glymphatic function has also been studied in the context of subarachnoid hemorrhages (SAH) and ischemic strokes. There is evidence that suggests severe impairment of glymphatic function after SAH and in the acute phase of ischemic stroke, reducing clearance of metabolites and other waste products [60]. Chronic cerebral hypoperfusion after a stroke is shown to contribute to the development of post-stroke dementia by impaired amyloid clearance through the glymphatic system [61].

In Parkinson's disease (PD) excessive accumulation of toxic forms of  $\alpha$ -synuclein has an essential role in the onset of the disease, due to imbalance between production and clearance in the brain [62]. Zou et al.'s research [63], demonstrates that there is an impairment in the glymphatic clearance of  $\alpha$ -synuclein in the brain of A53T mice, suggesting that the dysfunction of the glymphatic system may be a crucial element in the onset and progression of Parkinson's disease [63]. In addition to this mechanism, there are also comments on the negative effect of deteriorated dopaminergic neurons, linked to alterations in REM sleep, circadian rhythms and clock gene dysfunction [64].

In type 2 diabetes mellitus there is an imbalance between increase in glymphatic influx without the same increase in the efflux of interstitial fluid, which leads to solute accumulation extracellularly and subsequent cognitive decline [65].

Through the years the effect of stress has been researched from its effect on the cardiovascular system [66], through its impact on the metabolism [67], immune system [68,69] and central nervous system [70]. There is substantial evidence connecting the glymphatic system to numerous diseases, that have a tremendous impact on the lives of many people around the globe. The proper function of this waste-clearing mechanism in the brain can be important in diagnosing, managing, treating and preventing these diseases. That is why it is important to study, research and evaluate the factors that interfere with the system. Although the direct impact of stress on the glymphatic system has not been extensively researched, there are

indications that drive us to believe that studying this correlation can be beneficial for the management of multiple diseases and conditions, affecting the CNS.

## **6. Conclusion**

The research on the impact of stress on the glymphatic function may still be lacking, but there are clear indications that there is value in researching the topic. New findings regarding the mechanisms of the onset and progression of neurodegenerative diseases would sufficiently fill the gaps in our understanding of them and also open up numerous possibilities for their prevention, early diagnosis and treatment. Chronic exposure to stress – identified as a culprit in many diseases, including diabetes, obesity, depression and cardiovascular disease, undoubtedly plays a role in various CNS disorders as well. It is promising to evaluate if through stress management methods, via mechanisms that influence the glymphatic pathway, waste-clearing in the brain can be bettered, which in turn would lead to improvement in the prognosis of diseases where accumulation of metabolites is a major factor.

## **7. Acknowledgements:**

All the contributing authors have participated in the manuscript. MI and MaMu designed the study. All authors (MI, MN and MaMu) contributed to the interpretation of the data and writing of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

#### **8. Conflict of Interest:**

The authors have no conflict of interest with any commercial or other association in connection with the submitted article.

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