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Anatomy & Physiology: Current Research

Perspective

Gastrointestinal Motility: Current Advances in Physiological Research

Arjun Shrestha*

Department of Medical Physiology, Himalayan Institute of Medical Sciences, Kathmandu, Bagmati Province, Nepal

DESCRIPTION

Gastrointestinal (GI) motility is a fundamental physiological process that ensures the coordinated movement of ingested food, digestive secretions and waste products throughout the gastrointestinal tract. Efficient motility is essential for nutrient digestion, absorption, fluid balance, immune regulation and maintenance of the gut microbiome. Although gastrointestinal motility has traditionally been explained through neural and muscular mechanisms, recent advances in physiology have revealed a far more complex regulatory network involving the enteric nervous system, smooth muscle cells, interstitial cells of Cajal, immune mediators, endocrine signaling and the intestinal microbiota. The gastrointestinal tract possesses an intrinsic nervous system known as the Enteric Nervous System (ENS), often referred to as the "second brain." Comprising millions of neurons organized into the myenteric and submucosal plexuses, the ENS independently regulates peristalsis, secretion, blood flow and mucosal function while maintaining continuous communication with the central nervous system through the gut brain axis. Recent physiological research suggests that this bidirectional communication influences not only digestive function but also emotional regulation, cognitive processes and immune responses. This expanded understanding emphasizes that gastrointestinal motility should be viewed as a systemic physiological process rather than an isolated digestive function.

A major advancement in motility research has been the recognition of the central role played by the Interstitial Cells of Cajal (ICCs). These specialized pacemaker cells generate slow wave electrical activity that coordinates smooth muscle contractions throughout the gastrointestinal tract. Alterations in ICC number or function have been implicated in disorders such as gastroparesis, chronic intestinal pseudo obstruction, functional dyspepsia and chronic constipation. Another emerging area involves the relationship between gastrointestinal motility and the gut microbiome. The intestinal microbiota produces numerous metabolites, including short chain fatty acids, bile acid derivatives and neurotransmitter like compounds, that directly influence enteric neuronal activity, smooth muscle contractility and mucosal immunity. Conversely, altered motility affects microbial composition by modifying intestinal transit time and nutrient availability. This reciprocal relationship has transformed the understanding of digestive physiology, suggesting that disturbances in the microbiome may contribute to functional gastrointestinal disorders such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) and Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD). Future microbiome targeted therapies may therefore complement conventional pharmacological treatments.

Advances in gastrointestinal imaging and functional assessment have also enhanced physiological research. High resolution manometry provides detailed measurements of pressure patterns throughout the esophagus, stomach, small intestine and colon, allowing clinicians to characterize motility disorders with remarkable precision. Wireless motility capsules, magnetic resonance imaging, functional ultrasonography and three dimensional computational modeling further improve the visualization of gastrointestinal movement under physiological conditions. These technologies offer more comprehensive assessments than conventional diagnostic methods and support individualized treatment planning. Artificial intelligence (AI) is beginning to transform gastrointestinal physiology research by enabling rapid analysis of large datasets obtained from imaging, motility recordings, endoscopy and wearable monitoring devices. Machine learning algorithms can identify subtle motility abnormalities, classify disease phenotypes, predict therapeutic responses, and assist clinicians in making evidence-based decisions. Integration of AI with physiological monitoring may facilitate earlier diagnosis of gastrointestinal disorders while supporting precision medicine approaches tailored to individual patients. The influence of systemic physiological factors on gastrointestinal motility is another area of increasing interest. Hormones such as motilin, ghrelin, serotonin, cholecystokinin and Glucagon Like Peptide-1 (GLP-1) interact with neural pathways to coordinate digestive activity according to nutritional status. Additionally, psychological stress, sleep disturbances, aging, metabolic disorders and chronic inflammation significantly alter gastrointestinal motor function through neuroendocrine and immune mechanisms. Understanding these interactions reinforces the concept that gastrointestinal motility reflects whole body physiological regulation rather than isolated intestinal activity.

Correspondence to: Arjun Shrestha, Department of Medical Physiology, Himalayan Institute of Medical Sciences, Kathmandu, Bagmati Province, Nepal, E-mail: arjun.shrestha@hims.edu.np

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