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Anatomy & Physiology: Current Research

Perspective

Neurophysiological Mechanisms Underlying Cognitive Aging

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DESCRIPTION

Cognitive aging is a complex biological process characterized by gradual changes in memory, attention, processing speed and executive function that occur throughout the lifespan. As global life expectancy continues to increase, understanding the neurophysiological mechanisms underlying cognitive aging has become a major focus of neuroscience, gerontology and precision medicine. Although aging is often associated with cognitive decline, recent research has demonstrated that the aging brain retains considerable adaptability through neuroplasticity, compensatory mechanisms and environmental influences. The anatomical foundation of cognitive aging involves progressive changes in brain structure and connectivity. Aging is associated with reductions in gray matter volume, alterations in white matter integrity and changes in regional brain organization. The prefrontal cortex and hippocampus are particularly vulnerable to age related modifications because of their essential roles in executive function, working memory, learning and spatial navigation. Declines in synaptic density, dendritic complexity and neuronal communication efficiency contribute to slower information processing and reduced cognitive flexibility. However, these structural changes are highly variable among individuals, suggesting that biological aging and cognitive aging do not always occur at the same rate.

One of the central neurophysiological mechanisms involved in cognitive aging is altered synaptic function. Synapses are critical sites for communication between neurons, and their efficiency depends on neurotransmitter availability, receptor activity and intracellular signaling pathways. Aging influences several neurotransmitter systems, including acetylcholine, dopamine, serotonin and glutamate, which regulate attention, motivation, learning and memory. Reduced dopaminergic signaling, particularly within frontostriatal networks, contributes to changes in executive function and cognitive processing speed. Mitochondrial dysfunction is another important contributor to cognitive aging. Neurons have exceptionally high energy demands, requiring continuous ATP (Adenosine Triphosphate) production to maintain electrical activity, synaptic transmission and cellular repair mechanisms. With advancing age, mitochondria accumulate DNA (Deoxyribose Nucleic Acid) damage, produce increased reactive oxygen species and demonstrate reduced efficiency in energy metabolism. These changes can impair neuronal resilience and increase vulnerability to oxidative stress. Recent studies suggest that maintaining mitochondrial health through physical activity, dietary regulation and metabolic interventions may support cognitive function during aging.

Inflammation and immune regulation also play significant roles in age related brain changes. The aging brain exhibits a state of chronic low grade inflammation known as neuroinflammation, characterized by altered microglial activation and increased production of inflammatory mediators. While controlled immune responses are essential for neuronal maintenance and repair, persistent inflammation can disrupt synaptic function and contribute to cognitive impairment. The emerging field of neuroimmunology has revealed that interactions between immune cells, neurons, and glial cells are central regulators of cognitive health. Neural network reorganization represents another important aspect of cognitive aging. Functional imaging studies demonstrate that older adults often show altered patterns of brain activation during cognitive tasks. While some changes reflect reduced efficiency, others represent compensatory mechanisms in which additional brain regions are recruited to maintain performance. The concept of cognitive reserve suggests that education, intellectual engagement, social interaction, and lifelong learning strengthen neural networks and provide resilience against age related decline. I believe that promoting cognitive reserve should become a major focus of healthy aging strategies. Genetic and epigenetic mechanisms further influence cognitive aging trajectories. Variations in genes associated with neuronal function, lipid metabolism, inflammation and cellular repair pathways contribute to differences in cognitive resilience among individuals. Epigenetic modifications, including DNA methylation and histone regulation, alter gene expression patterns during aging and influence neuronal function. Advances in genomics and epigenomics are providing new opportunities to identify biomarkers that predict cognitive aging patterns and potential therapeutic targets. Technological advances are revolutionizing research into cognitive aging.

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Received: 01-Sep-2025, Manuscript No. APCR-25-43611; **Editor assigned:** 03-Sep-2025, PreQC No. APCR-25-43611 (PQ); **Reviewed:** 17-Sep-2025, QC No. APCR-25-43611; **Revised:** 24-Sep-2025, Manuscript No. APCR-25-43611 (R); **Published:** 01-Oct-2025, DOI: 10.35248/2161-0940.25.15.566

Citation: Dubois C (2025). Neurophysiological Mechanisms Underlying Cognitive Aging. Anat Physiol. 15:566.

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