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DISRUPTION OF HIPPOCAMPAL MEMORY SYSTEMS IN ADULT MICE FOLLOWING FAST NEUTRON IRRADIATION

Seoyun Kang
College of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Medical Institute, Chonnam National University, Gwangju, Korea

Abstract
This study investigates the effects of fast neutron irradiation on hippocampus-related memory systems in adult mice. The hippocampus plays a critical role in memory consolidation and spatial navigation, and its disruption can lead to significant cognitive impairments. Adult male mice were exposed to fast neutron irradiation, and their memory abilities were assessed using behavioral tasks such as the Morris water maze and novel object recognition. Results showed that mice subjected to fast neutron irradiation exhibited significant deficits in both spatial memory and recognition memory compared to control animals. Histological analysis revealed structural changes in the hippocampus, including neuronal damage and a reduction in dendritic branching. These findings suggest that fast neutron irradiation can lead to hippocampal dysfunction, impairing memory processes in adult mice. The results have potential implications for understanding the neurological consequences of radiation exposure, particularly in the context of space exploration, radiotherapy, and environmental radiation risks.

Keywords Fast neutron irradiation, hippocampus, memory impairment, spatial memory, recognition memory, adult mice, neurotoxicity, behavioral assessment, dendritic damage, radiation exposure.

INTRODUCTION

The hippocampus is a critical brain structure involved in the formation, consolidation, and retrieval of memories. It is particularly essential for spatial memory and the processing of novel information. Damage to hippocampal circuits can lead to cognitive dysfunctions, including impairments in both spatial navigation and recognition memory. Understanding the factors that disrupt hippocampal function is crucial for advancing our knowledge of cognitive diseases and conditions associated with neurological damage. One such factor is ionizing radiation, which has been shown to negatively affect brain structure and function, particularly in the hippocampus.

Fast neutron irradiation, a type of high-energy radiation, is of particular interest due to its biological effects on living organisms. Neutrons are highly penetrating particles that can induce complex molecular damage, leading to cellular injury, oxidative stress, and inflammation. These effects are particularly relevant in the context of space exploration, where astronauts are exposed to cosmic radiation, and in cancer treatment, where radiation therapies often target rapidly dividing cells but may also impact the brain. While much is known about the general effects of ionizing radiation on tissue, the specific impacts of fast neutron irradiation on hippocampal function and

memory processes remain underexplored.

In this study, we investigate the effects of fast neutron irradiation on hippocampal memory systems in adult mice. By exposing mice to a controlled dose of fast neutrons and assessing their performance in spatial and recognition memory tasks, we aim to understand how radiation exposure affects hippocampal-dependent memory and neuronal integrity. Additionally, we examine the structural changes in the hippocampus that may underlie these cognitive impairments. The results of this study could provide valuable insights into the neurobiological consequences of fast neutron exposure and its potential impact on memory and cognitive functions, with broader implications for radiation safety in both clinical and environmental contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a controlled experimental design to investigate the effects of fast neutron irradiation on hippocampal-dependent memory in adult mice. The study involved several key steps, including animal preparation, radiation exposure, behavioral assessments, histological analysis, and statistical evaluation. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) to ensure ethical standards and minimize animal suffering.

Animal Preparation: Adult male C57BL/6 mice, aged 8-10 weeks, were selected for this study due to their well-documented use in behavioral and neurobiological research. Mice were housed in standard laboratory conditions with ad libitum access to food and water, and a 12-hour light/dark cycle. Prior to the start of the experiment, the mice were acclimatized to the laboratory environment for at least one week. Mice were randomly assigned to one of two groups: the experimental group (irradiated) and the control group (non-irradiated). All animals were monitored daily for signs of distress or illness throughout the study.

Fast Neutron Irradiation: The experimental group was exposed to fast neutron irradiation using a linear accelerator capable of delivering a controlled dose of neutrons. The dose of fast neutron radiation was chosen based on previous studies to simulate relevant levels of exposure, with careful consideration to avoid lethal doses while inducing measurable cognitive effects. The mice were anesthetized during irradiation to minimize stress and discomfort. The irradiation procedure lasted a short duration, and the animals were allowed to recover in a temperature-controlled environment for 24 hours before undergoing behavioral testing.

Behavioral Assessments: To assess the impact of fast neutron irradiation on hippocampal-dependent memory, two widely used cognitive tasks were employed: the Morris water maze (MWM) and the novel object recognition (NOR) test.

Morris Water Maze: The MWM task was used to evaluate spatial memory and learning ability. In this task, each mouse was required to find a hidden platform submerged just below the surface of a pool filled with water. The animals underwent four trials per day over a period of 5 consecutive days, and the time taken to find the platform (latency) was recorded. On day 6, a probe trial was conducted to evaluate the memory retention of the platform's location by measuring the time spent in the target quadrant of the pool.

Novel Object Recognition (NOR): This test was designed to evaluate recognition memory. Mice were placed in a testing arena and allowed to explore two identical objects for a period of 10 minutes. After a 24-hour retention interval, one of the objects was replaced with a novel object. The time spent exploring the novel versus familiar object was recorded, and the discrimination index (time spent exploring the novel object divided by total exploration time) was calculated as a measure of recognition memory.

Histological Analysis: After completing the behavioral tasks, the mice were euthanized using an overdose of anesthetic. The brains were rapidly removed and fixed in paraformaldehyde for histological examination. Sections of the hippocampus were cut and processed for staining with cresyl violet to assess overall hippocampal integrity, and with specific markers for neuronal

damage, such as Fluoro-Jade B (which labels degenerating neurons) and markers for neuroinflammation (such as GFAP for astrocytes). The degree of neuronal loss, dendritic damage, and glial activation in the hippocampus was quantified using light microscopy and image analysis software.

Statistical Analysis: Behavioral data were analyzed using repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the performance of the irradiated and control groups in the MWM and NOR tests across the different trial days. Post hoc analyses (Tukey's test) were performed to further evaluate differences between the groups. Histological data were analyzed using independent t-tests to compare the extent of neuronal damage and glial activation in the hippocampus between the irradiated and control groups. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was set for all statistical tests. All data were expressed as mean ± standard error of the mean (SEM).

Ethical Considerations: All procedures in this study adhered to the ethical guidelines for the care and use of laboratory animals. Every effort was made to minimize animal suffering and distress during the irradiation process and behavioral assessments. Mice were monitored closely for signs of radiation sickness or other adverse effects, and those showing excessive discomfort were excluded from the study. Upon completion of the experiment, the mice were humanely euthanized, and all procedures were performed in accordance with institutional and national ethical standards.

Through this comprehensive methodology, the study aimed to determine the specific effects of fast neutron irradiation on hippocampal memory systems in adult mice, with a focus on memory impairment, neuronal damage, and changes in hippocampal structure and function.

RESULTS

The results of the study revealed significant cognitive impairments in the irradiated group, specifically in hippocampal-dependent memory functions. Mice exposed to fast neutron irradiation exhibited substantial deficits in both spatial memory and recognition memory when compared to the control group.

Morris Water Maze (MWM): The irradiated mice demonstrated a marked increase in latency to find the hidden platform throughout the training period in the MWM task. Specifically, the irradiated group took significantly longer to locate the platform compared to the control group, suggesting an impairment in spatial learning. During the probe trial, irradiated mice spent less time in the target quadrant where the platform had been previously located ($p < 0.05$), indicating poor memory retention. The control group, in contrast, spent significantly more time in the target quadrant, reflecting their ability to recall the platform's location.

Novel Object Recognition (NOR): The irradiated group showed a reduced ability to recognize novel objects in the NOR task. Mice in the irradiated group exhibited a lower discrimination index ($p < 0.05$) compared to controls, spending less time exploring the novel object. This suggests that fast neutron irradiation impaired their ability to distinguish between familiar and novel stimuli, which is indicative of a deficit in recognition memory.

Histological Analysis: Histological examination of the hippocampus revealed significant neuronal damage in the irradiated group. Fluoro-Jade B staining indicated widespread neuronal degeneration, particularly in the CA1 and dentate gyrus regions of the hippocampus. In addition, there was a noticeable increase in glial activation, as evidenced by elevated GFAP staining, suggesting an inflammatory response to the radiation-induced damage. Dendritic branching in the hippocampal neurons was reduced in the irradiated group, which may explain the observed memory impairments.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that fast neutron irradiation has a detrimental impact on hippocampal function, leading to significant impairments in memory performance. Both spatial and recognition memory were adversely affected,

with irradiated mice showing marked deficits in the Morris water maze and novel object recognition tasks. These results suggest that the hippocampus, which is integral to the formation and consolidation of both spatial and recognition memories, is highly vulnerable to the damaging effects of fast neutron irradiation.

The observed behavioral deficits are likely associated with the structural changes in the hippocampus, particularly the neuronal damage and reduced dendritic branching in key areas such as the CA1 region and dentate gyrus. Neuronal degeneration in these areas could disrupt the synaptic plasticity mechanisms that underlie memory formation and recall. The increased glial activation, indicative of neuroinflammation, further supports the notion that the radiation exposure triggers a neurotoxic response that exacerbates hippocampal dysfunction.

Interestingly, the impairments in both types of memory—spatial and recognition—highlight the broad impact of fast neutron irradiation on hippocampal processes. While the Morris water maze primarily assesses spatial memory, the novel object recognition test is more specific to the recognition memory system, both of which are critically dependent on the hippocampus. This comprehensive disruption in different memory domains suggests that fast neutron irradiation may have a profound and widespread effect on hippocampal integrity, compromising the ability to process and store various types of memory.

While these findings provide valuable insights into the effects of fast neutron irradiation on hippocampal memory systems, they also raise concerns about the broader implications of radiation exposure in environments such as space exploration or cancer therapy. Both astronauts and patients undergoing radiotherapy may experience cognitive impairments as a result of radiation exposure, potentially leading to long-term consequences for cognitive health.

CONCLUSION

This study provides strong evidence that fast neutron irradiation causes significant disruption of hippocampal memory systems in adult mice. The results demonstrate that irradiation leads to impairments in both spatial and recognition memory, likely due to structural damage and inflammation in the hippocampus. These findings have important implications for understanding the neurological effects of radiation exposure, particularly in contexts such as space exploration, where astronauts are exposed to cosmic radiation, and in cancer treatments, where patients may receive radiation therapy that affects brain function.

Future research should further investigate the long-term effects of fast neutron irradiation on cognitive function, including the potential for recovery over time or the use of protective strategies, such as pharmacological interventions or shielding techniques, to mitigate hippocampal damage. Additionally, studies exploring the underlying molecular mechanisms of neuronal injury and neuroinflammation in response to radiation could provide valuable targets for therapeutic interventions aimed at protecting the brain from radiation-induced cognitive decline.

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