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Pathogenesis and Therapeutic Strategies for Tinnitus Based on Inflammatory and Neuroimmune Mechanisms

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Abstract. Tinnitus, the perception of phantom sound in the absence of an external stimulus, is increasingly understood to arise from a complex interplay of inflammatory and neuroimmune processes as well as maladaptive neural plasticity. In the periphery, cochlear insult, whether due to age-related hearing loss, acoustic trauma, ototoxic drugs, or chronic noise exposure, triggers the release of pro-inflammatory cytokines such as TNF-α, IL-1β, and IL-6. These mediators can disrupt tight junctions in the blood–brain barrier, permitting peripheral immune factors to infiltrate central auditory pathways. Within the CNS, activated microglia adopt an M1-proinflammatory phenotype, releasing additional cytokines and reactive oxygen species, while astrocytes lose their homeostatic regulation of glutamate and calcium signaling, further promoting hyperexcitability. These glial changes drive synaptic remodeling and neuronal hyperactivity in key auditory nuclei, consolidating tinnitus percepts through aberrant cortical reorganization. Therapeutic efforts have therefore focused on attenuating inflammation with localized interventions, such as intrathecal corticosteroid injections, and systemic agents like minocycline or anti-TNF biologics. Concurrently, neuromodulation strategies (repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation, transcranial direct-current stimulation, and vagus nerve stimulation) aim to recalibrate cortical excitability and foster adaptive plasticity. Together, these approaches represent a multi-faceted framework for targeting both the immunological and electrophysiological underpinnings of tinnitus.

Keywords: tinnitus, neuroinflammation, glial activation, neuromodulation

1. Introduction

Tinnitus ranks a top the most common disabling auditory disorders and is estimated to have affected anywhere between 5 and 42 percent of the world's population [1]. Of every 10 persons affected by tinnitus, approximately 4 to 5 develop it chronically , which markedly impair quality of life and often co-occur with sleep disturbances, anxiety, and depression [2]. Despite its high prevalence, the pathophysiological mechanisms underlying tinnitus remain poorly understood. The therapy presently practiced is symptomatic: hearing aids, cognitive behavioral therapy and sound masking. This therapeutic gap underscores the urgent need to elucidate the biological basis of tinnitus, from neuroinflammation and glial dysfunction to implementing targeted treatment.

Emerging evidence implicates neuroinflammation as a key driver of tinnitus. Noise and salicylate induced tinnitus models in various animal consistently reveal increased levels of pro-inflammatory

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cytokines such as tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-a) and interleukin-1 beta (IL-1B) in structures involved in auditory functions such as the cochlea, inferior colliculus (IC), and auditory cortex (AC) [1]. These cytokines disrupt synaptic homeostasis by fostering excitation via NMDA receptors and repressing GABAergic inhibition, thus putting neurons in a hyperexcitable state that may sustain tinnitus. Salicylate administration in rats, for example, rapidly increases TNF-α and IL-1β expression in the IC, correlating with behavioral evidence of tinnitus. Remarkably, pharmacological or genetic blonde of TNF-a receptors prevented the development of tinnitus in noise0exposed mice, suggesting the involvement of inflammatory signaling tinnitus onset. However, there is a contradictory result for humans since some find increased serum IL-6 or decreased IL-10 in tinnitus patients, whereas other report no such difference, possibly dependent on tinnitus-duration, aetiology, or even comorbid hearing loss. These differences stress the challenge of going all the way from an animal finding to a human and call for standardized neuroinflammation biomarkers for tinnitus.

Astrocytes, the star-shaped glial cells of the central nervous system, have recently been implicated as key mediators in the maladaptive plasticity associated with tinnitus. Among other things, astrocytes regulate synaptic transmission through tripartite synapses, mediate neurovascular coupling, and provide metabolic support to neurons. In cases of tinnitus, reactive astrocytes can assume detrimental phenotypes wherein neurotoxic A1 astrocytes release pro-inflammatory cytokines (e.g., TNF-α, IL-1β) and reactive oxygen species that further impair synaptic function, while A2 astrocytes repair tissues and clear glutamate, acting in a neuroprotective capacity [3]. For example, following an acoustic trauma in the dorsal cochlear nucleus (DCN), a crucial node in tinnitus generation, the astrocytes change morphologically and increase their expression of GFAP in association with fusiform cell hyperactivity. These astrocytes may also contribute to tinnitus through the "gut-brain-ear" axis by sensing systemic immune cues or inflammation associated with dysbiosis [4].

Computational roles in astrocytes complicate the issue even further in tinnitus. Astrocytes utilize calcium-dependent signaling and gap-junction networks to integrate sensory, metabolic, and inflammatory inputs, thereby influencing neuronal ensembles. According to hierarchical predictive coding models of tinnitus, astrocytes might encode "context" for aberrant prior beliefs, hence facilitating the consolidation of phantom sound perception in the absence of peripheral inputs. For example, thalamic astrocytes may regulate gamma oscillation synchrony via GABA release, and dysfunction of astrocytes may contribute to the thalamocortical dysrhythmia under tinnitus. Similarly, noradrenergic signaling from the locus coeruleus to astrocytes may provide a link connecting stress-a known factor to worsen tinnitus-with neuroinflammatory priming.

These mechanistic insights inform novel therapeutic avenues. Anti-inflammatory agents, such as intratympanic corticosteroids or inhibitors of TNF-α (e.g., etanercept), present themselves as probable etiologic treatments studied in animal models but need to be proven by rigorous clinical trials . On the contrary, manipulating astrocyte-specific pathways affecting connexin gap junctions or potassium buffering may restore balanced synaptic activity without compromising beneficial neuroimmune actions. Neuromodulation techniques may perhaps indirectly influence astrocytes by modifying calcium dynamics or neurovascular coupling. This paper will focus on the neuroinflammatory processes mediated by cytokine dysregulation and astrocyte reactivity that drives maladaptive synaptic plasticity in auditory pathways, leading to tinnitus perception. Targeting these mechanisms through anti-inflammatory therapies or astrocyte modulation may alleviat3e tinnitus symptoms.

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2. Peripheral inflammatory mechanisms

2.1. Cochlear production of pro-inflammatory cytokines

Acoustic trauma, ageing and ototoxic drugs activate resident macrophages (e.g., cochlear macrophages, perivascular melanocytes) and recruit circulating monocytes into the scala tympani. Within hours, these cells secrete tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), interleukin-1 beta (IL-1β), and interleukin-6 (IL-6) , which in turn up-regulate NF-κB signaling in supporting cells and fibrocytes. The resulting feed-forward loop amplifies oxidative stress, complement activation and extracellular-matrix remodeling in the organ of Corti, establishing a pro-inflammatory micro-environment that persists for days to weeks after the initial insult [5].

2.2. Destabilization of hair-cell synapses and aberrant spontaneous firing

Pro-inflammatory cytokines disorganize presynaptic Ca^{2+} channels and shrink ribbon bodies at inner-hair-cell synapses, whereas excess glutamate and reduced GABAergic inhibition drive postsynaptic afferent boutons into a hyperexcitable state. This inflammatory cascade can disrupt the delicate balance of hair cell–neural synapse homeostasis by altering ion channel function, impairing neurotransmitter release, modifying receptor sensitivity, disrupting synaptic connectivity through intracellular signaling pathways, and ultimately leading to aberrant spontaneous firing patterns in auditory nerve fibers that underlie tinnitus [6].

3. Central glial activation and neural plasticity

3.1. Microglial M1/M2 polarization: neurotoxicity versus repair

Beyond the cochlea, central glial cells undergo activation, influencing neural plasticity and potentially exacerbating damage. Microglia, the primary immune cells of the central nervous system, exhibit polarization into M1 and M2 phenotypes, each associated with distinct neurotoxic or repair effects. The M1 phenotype ($iNOS^+$, $CD86^+$) releases nitric oxide and TNF-α, potentiating NMDA-receptor currents and synchronising fusiform-cell firing [7]. By contrast, M2 microglia ($Arg1^+$, $CD206^+$) secrete IL-10 and TGF-β that support synaptic pruning and debris clearance. A chronic M1-skewed balance sustains network hyperexcitability and hampers functional recovery.

3.2. Astrocytic regulation of glutamate turnover and calcium signaling

Astrocytes normally buffer extracellular glutamate via GLT-1/GLAST transporters and propagate calcium waves through connexin-43 gap junctions, stabilizing excitatory–inhibitory tone [8]. Dysregulation in these astrocytic functions can further impact neuronal excitability and synaptic function, contributing to maladaptive neural plasticity. The interplay between these peripheral inflammatory events and central glial responses highlights a complex pathway that can lead to auditory pathway alterations and potential hearing impairments.

4. Peripheral-central immune crosstalk network

Upon cochlear insult, proinflammatory mediators such as tumor necrosis factor alpha and activated matrix metalloproteinases target and proteolytically cleave endothelial tight junction proteins including claudin 5 and occluding. This degradation undermines the integrity of both the blood brain

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and blood labyrinth barriers, markedly increasing paracellular permeability. Circulating cytokines, chemokines, and peripheral immune cells can then invade central auditory structures, first entering cochlear nuclei and advancing to higher order centers such as the inferior colliculus. In these regions, infiltrating factors promote microglial and astrocyte activation, elevate reactive oxygen species production, increase cytokine release, and drive a self-sustaining cycle of neuroinflammation that expands injury well beyond the initial cochlear site.

5. Gut-brain-ear axis and systemic immune modulation

5.1. Intratympanic corticosteroid injections

Delivering dexamethasone or methylprednisolone through the round window achieves perilymph concentrations dozens of times higher than systemic dosing for several hours, directly suppressing NF-κB-driven transcription, stabilizing ion homeostasis and acutely improving tinnitus handicap indices; yet therapeutic benefit often wanes as the drug clears, and repeated injections risk tympanic-membrane perforation or secondary otitis, restricting the approach to acute acoustic trauma, sudden sensorineural hearing loss with tinnitus, or autoimmune inner-ear disease responsive to steroids [9].

5.2. Small-molecule inhibitors and biologics

Minocycline, a brain-penetrant tetracycline, blocks microglial M1 polarization and caspase-1-mediated IL-1β maturation when administered within the first two days after cochlear insult, but its longer-term use is limited by vestibular and gastrointestinal side-effects. Additionally, inhibitors targeting specific inflammatory pathways, such as IL-1R antagonists and TNF-α inhibitors like etanercept, offer targeted specificity. However, these advanced biologics may also present potential adverse effects that need to be carefully managed. The development and application of these interventions aim to modulate the immune response within the auditory system, potentially mitigating damage and improving outcomes in conditions associated with inflammation

6. Neuromodulation technologies

6.1. Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation (TMS) and transcranial Direct-Current Stimulation (tDCS)

Neuromodulation technologies offer promising avenues for treating conditions like tinnitus by targeting neural activity. TMS and tDCS are key examples, utilizing external stimuli to modulate the excitability of the auditory cortex. The effectiveness of TMS and tDCS can be influenced by various parameters, including stimulation frequency, intensity, and precise target localization, allowing for bidirectional modulation of neural activity. Emerging evidence suggests these techniques may also indirectly regulate glial inflammatory markers such as glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) and ionized calcium-binding adapter molecule 1 (Iba1), potentially dampening neuroinflammation [10].

6.2. Vagus-Nerve Stimulation (VNS) and implantable electrodes

VNS represents another neuromodulatory approach, which can involve both peripheral and central stimulation pathways to exert immunomodulatory effects. While VNS can be delivered through implantable electrodes, its application requires careful consideration of implantation methods, safety assessments, and ongoing research into chronic stimulation. Studies have explored the impact of

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VNS on the nervous system and its potential to influence inflammatory processes, offering a different mechanism for neural modulation [11]. The advancement of these neuromodulation techniques, driven by a deeper understanding of tinnitus pathophysiology and neural mechanisms, provides an encouraging outlook for developing novel therapeutic strategies.

7. Conclusion

Tinnitus reflects a cascade of peripheral and central inflammatory events that converge to create a hyperexcitable auditory network. Acoustic or ototoxic insults prompt cochlear macrophages and supporting cells to release TNF-α, IL-1β and other pro-inflammatory mediators, disrupting hair-cell synaptic integrity and increasing blood-labyrinth and blood-brain barrier permeability. In the central auditory pathway, M1-skewed microglia and reactive astrocytes further destabilize excitation–inhibition balance through excessive cytokine release, glutamate dysregulation and aberrant calcium signaling, thereby reinforcing a high-gain thalamocortical loop capable of sustaining phantom sound perception.

Efforts to counteract these processes with intratympanic corticosteroids, minocycline or biologics (IL-1R/TNF-α antagonists) demonstrate proof-of-concept in preclinical models but suffer from transient efficacy, safety concerns, and need for repeated dosing. Similarly, neuromodulation techniques, TMS/tDCS and VNS, offer non-pharmacological routes to reshape cortical excitability and may indirectly temper glial activation, yet optimal stimulation parameters, long-term plasticity and implant safety remain unresolved.

Bridging mechanistic insight to durable clinical benefit requires multi-center trials stratified by validated glial–inflammatory biomarkers and patient subtypes. Engineering advances, such as nanoparticle- or hydrogel-based delivery systems integrated with real-time EEG or neurochemical feedback, could enable closed-loop modulation of key nodes in the auditory network. Finally, harnessing genomic, microbiome and wearable-sensor data to craft personalized, multimodal treatment regimens promise to shift tinnitus management from symptomatic relief toward targeted, etiology-driven therapies.

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