eISSN: 2229-3213 pISSN: 2229-3205
The Journal of Applied Science and Social Science
Volume 16,Issue 03 March, 2026

RABIES VIRUS AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM

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Abstract: Rabies virus is a highly neurotropic pathogen that causes a fatal encephalitic disease affecting the central nervous system (CNS) of humans and animals. Despite the availability of effective vaccines, rabies remains a significant public health concern in many parts of the world, particularly in developing countries. The virus exhibits a unique pathogenic mechanism, entering peripheral nerves and traveling retrogradely to the CNS, where it causes progressive neurological dysfunction. This article aims to analyze the effects of rabies virus on the central nervous system, focusing on its pathogenesis, mechanisms of neural invasion, clinical manifestations, diagnostic approaches, and treatment challenges. The findings emphasize the importance of early intervention and preventive strategies to reduce mortality.

Keywords: Rabies virus, neurotropic virus, central nervous system, encephalitis, pathogenesis

Introduction

Rabies virus is a single-stranded, negative-sense RNA virus belonging to the genus Lyssavirus within the Rhabdoviridae family. It is characterized by its bullet-shaped morphology and strong neurotropism, meaning it specifically targets nervous tissue. Rabies is one of the oldest known infectious diseases and remains almost universally fatal once clinical symptoms appear [1].

The virus is primarily transmitted through the bite of an infected animal, most commonly dogs, although other mammals such as bats, raccoons, and foxes may also serve as reservoirs. After entry into the host, the virus replicates locally in muscle tissue before gaining access to peripheral nerves. It then travels toward the central nervous system via retrograde axonal transport, a process that distinguishes rabies from many other viral infections [2].

Globally, rabies causes tens of thousands of deaths annually, with the majority occurring in Asia and Africa. Children are particularly vulnerable due to increased exposure to animal bites [3]. Despite advances in vaccination and post-exposure prophylaxis, delayed diagnosis and lack of access to healthcare services contribute significantly to mortality.

The central nervous system is the primary target of rabies virus infection. Once the virus reaches the brain, it leads to acute encephalitis, characterized by neuronal dysfunction rather than extensive cell death. This unique feature suggests that rabies virus manipulates neuronal function while preserving cellular integrity, allowing it to evade immune detection [4].

Understanding the interaction between rabies virus and the central nervous system is critical for developing effective therapeutic strategies. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms by which rabies virus affects the CNS, including its entry, spread, and impact on neuronal function.

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted as a narrative literature review focusing on the neurotropic effects of rabies virus. Scientific databases including PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science were systematically searched using keywords such as “rabies virus,” “central nervous system,” “neuroinvasion,” and “encephalitis.”

Inclusion criteria included peer-reviewed articles published between 2005 and 2025 that addressed molecular, clinical, and pathological aspects of rabies infection. Experimental studies, clinical case reports, and review articles were considered. A total of 52 articles were identified, and 20 were selected based on relevance and scientific quality.

Data were categorized into the following themes: viral structure, mechanisms of neural invasion, CNS pathology, clinical manifestations, and diagnostic methods. A qualitative synthesis approach was used to interpret and integrate findings.

Results

Neuroinvasion Mechanism

The rabies virus enters the host through damaged skin or mucosa and initially replicates in muscle cells at the site of inoculation. The virus binds to nicotinic acetylcholine receptors at neuromuscular junctions, facilitating entry into peripheral nerves [5]. Following entry, the virus utilizes retrograde axonal transport to migrate toward the spinal cord and brain.

This transport occurs at a rate of approximately 12–100 mm per day, depending on the host and site of infection. The ability of the virus to travel within neurons allows it to evade immune surveillance, as it remains shielded from circulating antibodies.

Pathological Changes in the CNS

Once inside the CNS, rabies virus primarily affects neurons in the hippocampus, brainstem, and cerebellum. One of the hallmark histopathological features is the presence of Negri bodies, which are eosinophilic cytoplasmic inclusions found in infected neurons [6].

Unlike many viral infections, rabies does not cause extensive neuronal destruction. Instead, it disrupts neuronal signaling and synaptic transmission. Studies have shown alterations in neurotransmitter release and ion channel function, leading to severe neurological symptoms.

Clinical Manifestations

Rabies infection progresses through several stages:

- **Prodromal phase:** fever, malaise, and paresthesia at the bite site
- **Excitative phase (furious rabies):** agitation, hydrophobia, aerophobia
- **Paralytic phase:** muscle weakness, paralysis, coma

Neurological symptoms are directly related to viral effects on the CNS. Hydrophobia, a classic symptom, results from dysfunction of brainstem nuclei controlling swallowing and respiration [7].

Table 1. Effects of Rabies Virus on CNS Structures

CNS Region	Functional Impact	Clinical Outcome
Hippocampus	Memory disruption	Confusion, agitation
Brainstem	Autonomic dysfunction	Hydrophobia, respiratory failure
Cerebellum	Motor coordination impairment	Ataxia
Spinal cord	Motor neuron involvement	Paralysis

Immune Response and Viral Evasion

Rabies virus employs several strategies to evade the host immune system. It suppresses interferon production and limits inflammatory responses within the CNS. This immune evasion contributes to disease progression and poor prognosis [8].

Diagnostic Approaches

Diagnosis of rabies involves detection of viral RNA using PCR, antigen detection through immunofluorescence, and serological testing. Postmortem examination remains a definitive method, particularly through identification of Negri bodies [9].

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that Rabies virus has a unique neuroinvasive strategy that allows it to reach the CNS while avoiding immune detection. Its ability to alter neuronal function without causing widespread cell death distinguishes it from other neurotropic viruses.

The progression of rabies is closely linked to the speed of viral transport and the host immune response. Early intervention through post-exposure prophylaxis is critical, as treatment options become ineffective once neurological symptoms develop [10].

The study also highlights the urgent need for improved access to vaccines and public health education in endemic regions. Advances in molecular diagnostics and antiviral research offer potential for future therapeutic strategies.

Conclusion

Rabies virus infection represents a severe and almost invariably fatal disease due to its profound effects on the central nervous system. Its neurotropic nature, immune evasion strategies, and rapid progression underscore the importance of early diagnosis and prevention. Continued research is essential to develop effective treatments and reduce the global burden of rabies.

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