

Aluminum and Alzheimer's Disease: An Update

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Abstract

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is the most common form of dementia in the elderly. AD is characterized by senile plaques and neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) comprised of amyloid- β protein (A β) deposits and hyper-phosphorylated tau protein (p-tau), respectively. Oxidative stress-induced neuronal damage is also involved in AD pathogenesis. In the 1970s, studies showed increased levels of aluminum (Al) in the AD brain, and neurofibrillary changes upon its injection into the brain, thus leading to the suggestion that Al may be one of the major causes of AD. However, later reports contradicted this hypothesis as studies revealed that Al-induced neurofibrillary changes were different from NFT in AD, and intake of high dose Al-containing antacid drugs did not induce AD. Other *in vitro* and *in vivo* studies found that Al was neurotoxic, and possibly promoting aggregation of A β and p-tau. Here, we review and verify the validity of Al pathogenesis in AD. Despite the multitude of studies, no direct evidence currently exists that specifically links Al with AD pathogenesis. Therefore, more advanced cohort studies are necessary to better understand the absolute risk of Al for AD, and to rigorously compare this link using other neurotoxic metals. Taken together, Al may be an environmental factor promoting cognitive impairment in AD patients, as well as other free radical-generating metal ions such as iron, copper and zinc.

Keywords: Alzheimer's disease; Aluminum; Dementia; Oxidative stress

Introduction

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is the most common form of dementia, mainly occurring in the aged population (>65 years of age). Pathologically, AD consists of two major hallmarks: neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) and senile plaques (SPs), which are comprised of hyper-phosphorylated tau (p-tau) filaments and amyloid- β protein (A β) fibrils, respectively. Numerous reports suggest that A β aggregation, namely the formation of A β oligomers, is an early event preceding other pathological changes in AD [1]. A β is physiologically generated from the cleavage of amyloid precursor protein by β - and γ -secretases in the endoplasmic reticulum (ER) and trans-Golgi network or in the late endosome, then secreted into the extracellular space [2]. Therefore, various factors promoting the formation of A β oligomers may be involved in the key molecular mechanisms underlying the pathogenesis of AD. For instance, in many forms of early-onset familial AD (FAD), highly aggregative A β 42 is over-produced by mutant Presenilin 1/2 genes [3]. Furthermore, A β aggregation may be promoted by apolipoprotein E [4] and by environmental factors, such as oxidative stress and diabetes [5]. Oxidative stress-inducing metal ions, such as iron (Fe) [6], copper (Cu) [7], zinc (Zn) and aluminum (Al) may contribute to the formation of SPs/NFTs and neuronal damage in the AD brain. Al has long been under debate as to whether it is a risk factor for AD. Therefore, the purpose of our review was to provide research findings on the putative link between Al and AD to understand what has been resolved thus far and what should be investigated in the future.

History of Al and AD

In the 1930s, Al was shown to have an adjuvant action [8], and in the 1940s, intrathecal injection of Al was reported to cause epilepsy in monkeys [9-11]. Klatzo et al. [12] showed that injection of a vaccine with Holt's adjuvant containing Al phosphate into the brains of rabbits caused epilepsy, as well as neurofibrillary changes. Terry and Pena [13] reported that NFTs observed in AD brains resembled those of Al-induced neurofibrillary changes; however, they later reported a morphological difference between the two [14]. Nevertheless, these earliest reports suggested the involvement of Al in AD pathology.

By the 1970s, the association between Al and AD pathogenesis became a major topic of scientific discussion. Crapper and Dalton reported that administration of Al into cat brain induced memory impairment and neurofibrillary degeneration [15]. Increased levels of Al were documented in AD brain tissues [16-18]; however, these elevations were later found to be associated with aging and not with NFT levels [19]. Numerous studies have provided varying results (despite the use of similar methods) when measuring the levels of Al in human brain tissues, found to be both positive (Table 1) and negative (Table 2). Although the exact reason for these discrepancies is unclear, differences in the sample tissues may have been a factor. Indeed, since aging may increase Al levels in the brain [19], selection of age-matched control brain tissues may thus be important.

Al was also suggested to be the cause of dialysis-associated encephalopathy (DAE) [20,21]. However, the DAE pathology was found to be clearly different from AD pathology (for more information, see below). Thus, in the following years, the debate about association between Al and AD diminished.

Epidemiology of Al and AD

Contamination of drinking water with Al polychloride in Camelford, England (Camelford water pollution incident; 1988) occurred. It was later revealed that the prevalence of dementia was not increased [22]. While, it was reported that the prevalence of AD was 1.5-fold higher in the area with water containing Al over 0.11 mg/L compared with the area of water containing Al under 0.01 mg/L [23].

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Authors	Year	Reference	Methods	Number of subjects	
				AD	Control
Crapper et al.	1973	[16]	EAAS	5	3
Crapper et al.	1976	[17]	EAAS	10	7
Trapp et al.	1978	[97]	EAAS	4	4
Crapper et al.	1980	[18]	EAAS	18	17
Perl and Brody	1980	[98]	EDX	3	3
Traub et al.	1981	[99]	EAAS	7	26
Markesbery et al.	1981	[69]	NAA	12	28
Ward and Mason	1987	[100]	NAA	28	30
Lukiw et al.	1992	[101]	EAAS	21	17
Xu et al.	1992	[102]	EAAS	10	10
Corrigan et al.	1993	[103]	ICP-MS	12	12
Lovell et al.	1993	[104]	LMMS	7	5
Andrási et al.	1995	[105]	ICP-AES, INAA	9	20
Bouras et al.	1997	[106]	LMMS	4	3
Solomon et al.	2001	[107]	IF-CLM	5	5
Srivastava and Jain	2002	[108]	ICP-MS	4	4
Andrási et al.	2005	[109]	ICP-AES, INAA	3	3
Walton	2006	[110]	HS	6	6
Walton	2010	[111]	HS	5	5
Rushina et al.	2011	[112]	EAAS	29	27

EAAS: electrothermal atomic absorption spectrometry; EDX: energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy; NAA: neutron activation analysis; ICP-MS: inductively coupled plasma source mass spectrometry; LMMS: laser microprobe mass spectrometry; ICP-AES: inductively coupled plasma atomic emission spectrometry; INAA: instrumental neutron activation analysis; IF-CLM: immunofluorescence using confocal laser microscopy; HS: histological staining.

Table 1: Reports of increased levels of Aluminum (Al) in Alzheimer's disease (AD) brains.

Authors	Year	Reference	Methods	Number of subjects	
				AD	Control
McDermott et al.	1979	[19]	EAAS	10	9
Jacobs et al.	1989	[113]	EDX, EAAS	6	4
Dedman et al.	1992	[114]	EAAS	7	7
Edwardson et al.	1992	[115]	EAAS	8	8
Bjertness et al.	1996	[116]	EAAS	16	14
Makjanic et al.	1998	[117]	STIM	6	4
Akatsu et al.	2012	[118]	ICP-MS	18	16

EAAS: electrothermal atomic absorption spectrometry; EDX: energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy; STIM: scanning transmission ion microscopy; ICP-MS: inductively coupled plasma source mass spectrometry.

Table 2: Reports of the absence of increased levels of Al in AD brains.

Epidemiological research about the link between Al and dementia/AD continued in many other countries as follows.

A considerable number of epidemiological studies have been performed in industries associated with the manufacture of Al products, or in areas containing drinking water where Al was found. However, determining the occupational risk for AD has been difficult because of the limited size of sample numbers and difficulty of diagnosis [24]. Studies in the United Kingdom, Norway and Canada reported significant correlation between Al and AD [23-26] (Table 3). Neri and Hewitt [27] reported that Al concentration over 0.2 mg/L in water may increase the incident rate of AD (odds ratio =1.46) in Canada [27]. However, in another study from Canada, fluorine content, rather than Al, was found to be more correlated with the incident rate of AD [28], and the Canadian Study of Health and Aging (CSHA)

suggested a low risk for AD from the consumption of water containing Al [29]. Such discrepancies in the same country may have resulted from differing regions in which the studies were conducted. While, Jacqmin-Gadda et al. [30] reported that Al content may be associated with cognitive dysfunction in the regions with low silicon content and low pH in water. More recently, a cohort study in France (Personnes agees Quid, PAQUID) reported that Al concentrations over 0.1 mg/L in water increased the risk for AD (relative risk=3.04), and high silica concentrations in water decreased the risk for AD [31]. However, obtaining highly reliable data from such epidemiological studies is considered to be quite difficult because although the human diet contains Al, absorption and levels of Al in blood are altered by various factors, such as silicon, pH, fluoride, Fe, calcium (Ca), carboxylic acids and renal function [32,33]. Some reports have suggested no significant correlation between Al and AD (Table 4). Bakar et al. [34] found no significant differences in the incidence of AD in areas with an acidic environment. Furthermore, many previous studies have revealed that consumption of tea or antacid drugs, which have high Al content, did not show a high incidence of AD [35-42]. These results indicate that various materials in drinking water and foods may act as the promoting or protecting factors for AD, and the effects of Al contained in water and foods may thus be masked by many factors.

Neurotoxicity of Al and Recommendation

Over the last 50 years, Al has been shown to be involved in epileptogenesis [9-11], and numerous *in vitro* and *in vivo* studies have reported on the neurotoxicity of Al. Al binds various organelles and proteins in the nucleus, cytoplasm, axon and synapse in neurons, exerting effects on the biological activity of magnesium, Fe, and Ca, thus interfering with the phosphorylation/dephosphorylation of nucleotides [43-45]. These actions may thus induce synaptic dysfunction [46-48], aberrant neuronal gene expression [49,50], over-stimulation of NMDA receptors leading to disruption of Ca homeostasis [51-53], oxidative stress [54], ER stress [55,56], mitochondrial damage [57,58] and others [59-62]. However, the major pathological hallmark of Al neurotoxicity was found to be the hyper-phosphorylation of neurofilament proteins [63-66]. Indeed, this characteristic was found in brain tissue of DAE, which has implicated Al as its cause [67,68]. Owing to the high binding affinity of Al with phosphate, Al may thus promote aggregation of

Authors	Year	Country	Reference	Number of subject	Age range
Martyn et al.	1989	UK	[23]	666 AD 519 other dementia	40-69 years
Flaten	1990	Norway	[25]	14,727 dementia	N/A
Frecker	1991	Canada	[26]	568,345 death 399 dementia	>70 years
Neri and Hewitt	1991	Canada	[27]	2,344 AD 2,232 controls	≥55 years
Forbes et al.	1991 1992 1994	Canada	[28] [119] [120]	782 people	45 years at baseline
Jacqmin et al. Jacqmin- Gadda et al.	1994 1996	France	[121] [30]	3,777 people	≥65 years
McLachlan et al.	1996	Canada	[122]	119 AD 51 controls	N/A
Gauthier et al.	2000	Canada	[123]	68 AD 68 controls	≥70 years
Rondeau et al.	2009	France	[31]	461 dementia incl. 364 AD	≥65 years

Table 3: Epidemiological reports showing a positive risk of Al-containing water for cognitive impairment, dementia, and AD.

Authors	Year	Country	Reference	Number of subject	Age range
Wettstein et al.	1991	Switzerland	[124]	805 people 99 dementia	81-85 years
Forster et al. Taylor et al.	1995	UK	[40] [125]	109 early-onset AD 109 controls	<65 years
Sohn et al.	1996	Korea	[126]	558 people 45 dementia	≥60 years
Martyn et al.	1997	UK	[127]	106 AD 441 controls	42-75 years
Molloy et al.	2007	Randomized case-control trial	[128]	16 AD 17 controls 10 young volunteers	N/A
Bakar et al.	2010	Turkey	[34]	273 people living in high Al area 164 people in other area	N/A

Table 4: Epidemiological and clinical trial reports showing an absence of a significant risk of Al-containing water for cognitive impairment, dementia, and AD.

Authors	Year	Reference	Methods	Number of subjects		Al detection
				AD	control	
Terry and Pena	1965	[13]	EDX	1	-	-
Perl and Brody	1980	[129]	EDX	3	3	+
Masters et al.	1985	[130]	EDX	6	-	+
Kobayashi et al.	1987	[131]	WDX	1	-	-
Jacobs et al.	1989	[113]	EDX	7	4	-
Moretz et al.	1990	[132]	EDX	3	-	-
Chafi et al.	1991	[133]	WDX, SIMS	7	-	-
Sparkman	1993	[134]	EDX	N/A	N/A	-
Lovell et al.	1993	[104]	LMMS	7	5	-(+ in neuron)
Kasa et al.	1995	[135]	solachrone azurine	10	5	±
Bouras et al.	1997	[106]	LMMS	4	3	+
Reusche	1997	[136]	LMMS	1 (DAE)	-	-(+ in DAE)
Makjanic et al.	1998	[117]	STIM	6	4	-
Murayama et al.	1999	[137]	Chelating autoclave	5	-	+

EDX: energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy; WDX: wavelength-dispersive X-ray microanalysis; SIMS: secondary ion mass spectrometry; LMMS: laser microprobe mass spectrometry; STIM: scanning transmission ion microscopy.

Table 5: Detection of Al in neurofibrillary tangles of AD brain tissues.

hyper-phosphorylated neurofilaments. However, evidence of such an effect may not directly indicate that Al plays a pivotal role in AD pathogenesis because NFTs in AD consists of p-tau.

Owing to the lack of consensus amongst epidemiological studies, it is still unclear whether oral Al intake increases the risk for AD. Therefore, this risk has not been approved by the European Food Safety Authority [32], Joint Food and Agriculture Organization of United Nations (FAO)/World Health Organization (WHO) [33], and Bundesinstitut für Risikobewertung. However, because aging is the major risk factor for sporadic AD, and that aging is a strong factor for promoting Al accumulation in brain tissue [19,69,70], the likelihood that Al is a risk factor for sporadic AD may thus be increased in the elderly. Impairment of the blood brain barrier or renal dysfunction during aging may promote the accumulation of Al in the brain. However, to study such effects may be quite difficult because aging itself is the strongest risk factor for AD, and some radical-generating metals other than Al,

such as Fe, Cu and Zn may also facilitate Aβ oligomer formation and accelerate AD pathogenesis [71,72]. Although it is difficult to determine the safe doses of Al intake, the FAO/WHO presently recommend a tolerable weekly intake of 2 mg/kg body weight [33].

Does Al Associate with AD Pathology?

Whether Al is involved in the onset and progression AD remains an important issue. Many previous reports have suggested that various molecular mechanisms contribute to AD pathogenesis. To date, the widely accepted major factors are: Aβ (particularly Aβ oligomers) aggregation, phosphorylation/aggregation of tau protein (forming NFTs), oxidative stress, mitochondrial damage and synaptic dysfunction [73]. Therefore, the influence of Al on these pathological characteristics of AD has been explored. Studies have indicated that Al may be associated with the aggregation of Aβ [74,75] and p-tau [74-80], and may also be involved in Aβ deposition [81-84]. Al accumulation was shown to not consistently coincide with NFTs (Table 5) and SPs (Table 6). Furthermore, the concentration of Al in biological fluids is less than 1 μM (Bush Al, personal communication). Al accumulation was shown to not consistently coincide with NFTs (Table 5) and SPs (Table 6). Thus the role of Al in the formation of NFTs and SPs compared with other metal ions, such as Zn, Cu and Fe may not be as prominent. Zn is a key modulator for synaptic neural transmission, reaching 150-300 μM during synaptic activity, thus possibly contributing to Aβ aggregation [85]. Also, trace amounts of Cu were shown to induce Aβ accumulation in brain tissues of cholesterol-fed rabbits [86]. Therefore, the definitive involvement of Al in NFT/SP formation in the AD brain is difficult to elucidate. Nevertheless, Al itself may promote neuronal damage independently of NFT/SP.

As previously mentioned in this review, the Al hypothesis for AD was based on a pathological similarity of neurofibrillary degeneration seen in both the AD and DAE brain. However, Reusche et al. [87] found that in brain tissue from dialysis patients, only 1 case out of 50 exhibited the accumulation of Aβ42 and p-tau. Phosphorylated neurofilaments and cytoplasmic argyrophilic inclusions have been shown to be characteristics of Al-induced pathology in DAE rather than the paired helical filaments that are consistently observed in AD [67,68,87]. Remarkably, Al-containing lysosome-derived argyrophilic inclusion in neurons and glial cells is a characteristic of DAE in those brain tissues. Overall, pathological findings between AD and DAE are different.

Authors	Year	Reference	Methods	Number of subjects		Al detection
				AD	control	
Masters et al.	1985	[130]	EDX	6	-	+
Candy et al.	1986	[138]	EDX, SIMS	7	-	+
Jacobs et al.	1989	[113]	EDX	7	4	-
Larsson et al.	1990	[139]	Proton microprobe	2	-	-
Moretz et al.	1990	[132]	EDX	3	-	-
Senitz and Blüthner	1990	[140]	Morin staining	3	-	+
Chafi et al.	1991	[133]	WDX, SIMS	7	-	-
Landsberg et al.	1992	[141]	Proton (nuclear) microscopy	5	2	-
Landsberg et al.	1993	[142]	Proton (nuclear) microscopy	6	2	±
Kasa et al.	1995	[135]	solachrone azurine	10	5	±
Yumoto et al.	2009	[143]	TEM-EDX	5	-	+

EDX: energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy; WDX: wavelength-dispersive X-ray microanalysis; SIMS: secondary ion mass spectrometry; TEM-EDX: energy-dispersive X-ray spectroscopy combined with transmission electron microscopy.

Table 6: Detection of Al in senile plaques of AD brain tissues.

Does Al Promote Dementia in AD Models?

Numerous studies of transgenic (Tg) animal models of AD have been performed to further confirm the possibility that Al is not directly linked to AD, but may enhance cognitive dysfunction and/or AD pathology. Pratico et al. [88] fed Tg2576 mice an Al-enriched diet (2 mg/kg/day, from 3-12 months old), finding that levels of isoprostane and A β increased and A β deposition was enhanced (compared with wild-type [wt]). Furthermore, vitamin E, an anti-oxidant, reversed such responses, which may support the idea that Al accelerates oxidative stress and AD pathology. Ribes et al. [89] fed Tg2576 or wt mice with a low dose of Al lactate (1 mg/g, from 5 months for 120 days), and found impaired cognition via oxidative stress in wt, which may not have interacted with the amyloidogenic pathway. Tg2576 mice fed the same diet (5-11 months old) showed that Al may act as a pro-oxidant agent in both Tg2576 and wild-type mice [90]. Al levels have also been shown to be higher in the hippocampus than in the cerebellum and cortex in both Tg2576 and wt mice [91]. Altogether, these studies have revealed that long-term exposure on a diet containing Al may induce oxidative stress and cognitive impairment with or without an exacerbated AD pathology. Recently, Akiyama et al. [92] found that administering Al or Zn in drinking water (100 mg/kg/day, from 8 months for 4-10 months) to Tg2576 or Tg2576/tau-P301L mice did not enhance the deposition of A β or tau deposition, nor the increase insoluble A β or A β oligomers. Although cognitive function and oxidative stress markers were not analyzed in the study, it is evident that an intake of such a high dose of Al did not enhance AD pathology related to the mutation of amyloid precursor protein. Overall, it is unclear as to why these studies have shown contradictory results. Our re-evaluation of these previous studies of animal experiments based on the differing types of Al salts used did not account for the discrepancies.

Furthermore, the Tg2576 model is an early-onset FAD model. Therefore, the effects of Al intake on AD pathology and cognitive function remain to be observed in a model of the late-onset sporadic AD. Unfortunately, such animal models are currently not available. Interestingly, however, chronic intake of low dose Al in aged wt rats was shown to cause cognitive deterioration and neuronal loss in regions usually affected by AD, the entorhinal cortex and hippocampus [93].

Therefore, Al intake may not be a strong factor for the cause or promotion of early-onset FAD pathogenesis. Nevertheless, long-term intake of low dose Al may promote oxidative stress and neuronal damage, thus contributing to the cognitive decline in the elderly population irrespective of their risk for developing this disease. Such a possible effect may not be specific for Al, and other radical-generating metals may also contribute to the cognitive decline.

How Can We Understand the Real Role of Al?

There are a number of environmental factors (e.g. aging, ischemia, diabetes, trauma, smoking) that pose risks for AD and cognitive decline [94]. As reviewed here, Al may not be the major environmental risk factor for the onset and progression of AD. However, Al might contribute to the acceleration of cognitive decline, as well as other free radical-generating metals, in the elderly population irrespective of whether they have AD. To better understand this hypothesis, a large cohort study, rather than an epidemiological investigation, may be necessary, for example the worldwide AD Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) [95]. Because brain A β accumulation may start 10-20 years before the onset of mild cognitive impairment or the prodromal AD stages [96], it may thus be necessary to evaluate the involvement of free radical-generating metal ions (Fe, Cu, Zn and Al) during these stages. Furthermore, levels

of these metals in the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) should be measured, followed by correlation analysis with amyloid imaging, AD biomarkers in the CSF, and cognitive examination outcomes.

Conclusion

Previous epidemiological, biochemical, and pathological studies have provided quite conflicting results regarding the involvement of Al in AD pathogenesis. Findings from studies involving DAE and AD mouse models therefore suggest that Al intake is not a direct cause for AD. However, Al and other free-radical generating metals show neurotoxic activity *in vitro*, thus indicating that they may promote cognitive impairment in rodents and humans because these metals accumulate in the aging brain. Therefore, above normal intake of Al (and other metals) is an environmental factor that may promote cognitive decline in the aged population, irrespective of whether they are at risk for developing AD. More advanced cohort studies are thus necessary to understand the absolute risk of Al (and other metals) for AD.

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