

Modulation of Neuroinflammatory Responses to Neural Implants

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Abstract

Neural implants have revolutionized neurology and neuroscience by offering novel therapeutic avenues for neurological disorders and functional restoration. However, their efficacy is often compromised by neuroinflammation, a complex and multifaceted response that adversely affects device performance and longevity. Understanding the mechanisms underlying neuroinflammation and its impact on neural implants are critical for developing strategies to mitigate these effects. Advances in biocompatible biomaterials and implant technologies, informed by neuroinflammatory research, hold promise for reducing immune reactivity and enhancing device functionality. Machine learning and novel signal processing methods are two of the most important recent advancements in software technology that have contributed to this quick progress. Application development in neuroscience is increasing as artificial intelligence (AI) systems get more sophisticated, effective, and quick. AI has the potential to enhance neural implant signal processing methods, such as the brain's interpretation of electrical impulses. The quality of life and long-term outcomes for people with neurological disorders may improve as a result of these important advancements in neurotechnology.

Keywords: Brain-computer interface; Neural implants; neuroinflammation

Neuroinflammatory Responses to Implanted Neurochemical Sensing Probes

According to studies, signal quality across all implanted central nervous system (CNS) sensors can be affected to differing degrees by insertion damage and foreign body response across both acute (seconds to minutes) and chronic (weeks to months) timeframes. Numerous intervention options for enhancing signal sensitivity and endurance result from an understanding of the biological processes at the cellular and molecular level that underlie the brain tissue response to the devices. Neurodegenerative diseases characterized by neurotransmitter signaling deficiencies can be effectively investigated using neurochemical sensing probes, which serve as both diagnostic tools and therapeutic platforms. However, the implantation of these biosensors often elicits adverse tissue reactions that disrupt the brain's neurochemical equilibrium. Within weeks post-insertion, a glial scar forms around the implant, creating a physical and biochemical barrier that contributes to progressive neurodegeneration and diminished signal sensitivity. This scar tissue impedes neuronal communication by obstructing the transmission of chemical messengers.

Recent studies highlight the pivotal role of non-neuronal cells in modulating the post-injury neurochemical environment. While astrocytes and microglia have been extensively characterized for their reactivity to implanted probes, emerging evidence suggests that other glial subtypes—including oligodendrocytes, their precursor cells, myelin structures, and vascular pericytes—also significantly influence this process. More recently, it was shown that both novel object recognition behavior and normal cortical gamma oscillations depend on astrocytic vesicular discharge [1]. Furthermore, norepinephrine has been demonstrated to activate astrocytes, which improves the astroglial network's reaction to local neural network activity [2]. Another study shown that immunodeficient mice's larger and more complex human astrocytes improved learning, activity-dependent plasticity, and long-term potentiation [3]. During perceptual learning, microglial cells have also been shown to engage with dendritic spines and engulf synapses [4-6]. It is unclear how the immune system's reaction to foreign bodies affects brain activity overall, but it may change how nerves operate, particularly in the reactive glial sheath region.

The foreign body response triggered by probe implantation initiates a cascade of inflammatory events. Activated immune cells may attempt to degrade the implant within hours; if unsuccessful, fibroblasts and immune cells encapsulate the device within weeks, leading to tissue isolation. Regardless of the technology used, the breaching of the blood–brain barrier (BBB) to insert devices triggers a cascade of biochemical pathways resulting in complex molecular and cellular responses to implanted devices. The initial insertion trauma compromises the BBB, causing localized injury to parenchymal cells [7–14], capillaries, and the extracellular matrix [15–17]. Capillary damage can result in erythrocyte extravasation, platelet activation [15], and focal hematoma formation [18]. BBB disruption exacerbates neuroinflammation through multiple pathways: increased oxidative stress and mitochondrial dysfunction, extravasation of inflammatory plasma proteins, impaired local oxygen and nutrient delivery, microglial activation and recruitment [17–21], accumulation of neurotoxic metabolites in the parenchyma [17, 19–22]. Other initial reactions include microglia migration and activation toward the implant [23, 24, 25–27]. Additionally, local astrocytes are activated, undergoing morphological changes and becoming hypertrophied. [28, 29, 25, 30–32]. This reactive astrogliosis further contributes to the inflammatory milieu, establishing a feedback loop that perpetuates tissue damage and functional impairment. Regardless of technology, implantable device insertion invariably ruptures distant cells and vasculature, breaks the blood–brain barrier, tears through extracellular matrix, and punctures cell membranes. This is particularly true when insertion-related dimpling is seen [33, 34, 35]. Examining the inflammation biochemical cascades that are started by device implantation is essential to comprehending how damage variability affects inconsistent sensor performance. Numerous conditions might cause the original damage to result in increased inflammation : (i) breaking down the blood-brain barrier; (ii) decreasing blood flow, oxygenation, and the elimination of neurotoxic waste, which can result in ischemia or hypoxia; (iii) increasing pressure and mechanical strain due to hemorrhage, vasogenic edema, and device volume accommodativeness; (iv) surface biofouling and inflammatory cytokine accumulation; (v) steric inhibition of prosurvival signaling from the implant substrate. When the blood–brain barrier is disrupted, plasma proteins that are foreign to the central nervous system (CNS) are deposited. These include al-

bumin (40 mg/mL or approximately 55%), globulins (10 mg/mL or approximately 38%), fibrin/fibrinogen (3 mg/mL or approximately 7%), thrombin, plasmin, complement, and red blood cells (hemosiderin) [36-46]. Increases in hemoglobin (due to the breakdown of red blood cells) in the brain cause reactive oxygen species (ROS) and reactive nitrogen species (RNS) that can cause secondary injury by oxidizing cell lipids and proteins [47]. For instance, ROS downregulate tight junction proteins, which increases BBB permeability [48]. In parallel, the oxidative stress that results in the activation and upregulation of pro-inflammatory cytokines like interleukin (IL)-1 β 60. Overall, it has been demonstrated that device insertion and disruption of the blood-brain barrier instantly activate neighboring microglia. Glial cells exhibit persistently high levels of proinflammatory cytokines (interleukin1 and TNF α) and chemokines (monocyte chemoattractant protein1, MCP1) throughout the implantation period, resulting in neuronal degeneration and demyelination [49-56]. Consequently, it is probable that the long term (several weeks) installation of these devices will limit undesirable tissue conditions by employing techniques that minimize disruption of blood vessels. For many research, the short and long term consequences of reduced blood flow brought on by the implantation of a probe or electrode must be taken into account in order to obtain useful measurements.

Biomaterial-Dependent Modulation of Neuroinflammatory Responses

The magnitude and progression of neuroinflammatory responses to neural implants are critically influenced by the physico-chemical properties of the biomaterials employed. Three key material characteristics govern this immune interaction: (1) mechanical properties, (2) surface topography, and (3) surface chemistry. Rough surface topographies, for instance, demonstrate increased pro-inflammatory potential due to greater surface area for protein adsorption and enhanced mechanical irritation of surrounding parenchyma. Conversely, smooth surfaces or engineered coatings (e.g., polyethylene glycol hydrogels) have shown efficacy in attenuating both acute neuroinflammation and chronic foreign body reactions [57].

In chronic recording applications utilizing silicon microelectrode arrays, the immediate "kill zone" of directly damaged neurons along the insertion track appears to have minimal impact on recording fidelity [57]. More consequential is the subsequent reactive gliosis that dominates the peri-implant microenvironment during the critical 6-week post-implantation period. This multifaceted tissue response represents the CNS's attempt to stop neuronal loss, limit focal inflammatory reactions, and seal the injured area [31, 58-63]. The gliotic cascade involves Angiogenesis and revascularization of the surrounding region as well as the recruitment of astrocytes, microglia, and NG2-expressing glial precursors [60, 64, 65]. Notably, The first week after brain electrode or probe implantation may see a high concentration of reactive astrocytes, microglia, and laminin-labeled vessels in the vicinity of the implant [66-67]. This spatiotemporal progression underscores the dynamic interplay between material properties and biological responses that ultimately determine implant performance. A study that used implantable hydrous iridium oxide microelectrodes to record extracellular pH potentiometrically revealed histological correlations and variations in the local pH surrounding the electrode [68, 69]. There was significant variation in the pH level, pattern (biphasic alkaline-acidic and triphasic acidic-alkaline acidic), depth, and duration of acidosis when these pH detecting devices were transplanted into the brain. Specifically, when post-mortem histology was used, higher acidity levels were frequently linked to larger blood cell counts in the brain parenchyma [68].

Implanted Neural Electrodes as Essential Tools for Neural Signal Recording and Their Neuroinflammatory Consequences

High-density wire microelectrode arrays (MEAs) are indispensable miniature tools for recording neural activity at single-cell and sub-millisecond resolution, and they constitute a primary data source for dissecting neural circuit function. Beyond fundamental neuroscience, these devices underpin emerging clinical technologies such as brain-computer interfaces [70] and neuro-prosthetic systems [71], and they are under active investigation for the treatment of intractable neurological disorders [72, 73].

However, the implantation of MEAs triggers a cascade of adverse effects, beginning with disruption of the blood-brain barrier (BBB) [74]. This breach exposes the brain parenchyma to blood-derived substances that are normally excluded, thereby initiating an acute immune response characterized by rapid activation of astrocytes and microglia [75]. Over time, this response evolves into chronic neuroinflammation. Reactive microglia and hypertrophic astrocytes release pro-inflammatory cytokines and reactive oxygen species, ultimately leading to neurite retraction, neuronal apoptosis, and the formation of a dense glial sheath surrounding the implant [76]. This encapsulation increases electrical impedance and attenuates both signal recording fidelity and charge delivery during stimulation. Persistent BBB leakage can further sustain the inflammatory milieu and allow neurotoxic molecules to accumulate in the peri-implant region, exacerbating neuronal loss and functional degradation over time.

Chronic implantation of microelectrode arrays elicits a stereotyped, multi-cellular neuro-inflammatory response that evolves over weeks to months and ultimately compromises device performance. Across rodent and feline models, a dense sheath of reactive astrocytes consistently envelops the probe track [77–85]. Concomitantly, microglia undergo rapid activation and accumulate at the interface within minutes of insertion, whereas NG2-expressing oligodendrocyte precursor cells (OPCs) are recruited over the ensuing hours and subsequently proliferate [85–87]. The latter cells extend processes toward the implant, secrete axon-growth inhibitory extracellular matrix molecules, and—unique among glia—receive bona fide synaptic input from neighboring neurons [88]. Collectively, these events culminate in the formation of a compact glial scar that is rich in hypertrophic astrocytes whose thickened, interdigitated membranes constitute a diffusional and electrical barrier [89, 90]. Immunohistochemical analyses demonstrate a rapid and sustained up-regulation of glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) beginning as early as three days post-implantation and persisting for at least several months [91]. Quantitative morphometry reveals a progressive decline in neuronal density within 0–50 μm of the electrode interface, with losses becoming statistically significant within 24 h and continuing to fluctuate thereafter (91). The inflammatory milieu is further amplified by activated glia that secrete pro-inflammatory cytokines—including tumor necrosis factor- α (TNF- α), interleukin-1 β (IL-1 β), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and interferon- γ (IFN- γ)—thereby exacerbating neuronal injury and degrading recording fidelity [92]. Rigid silicon or metallic microelectrode arrays are particularly potent inducers of a foreign-body reaction. Beyond the acute stab wound, chronic presence of the device sustains an inflammatory cascade characterized by persistent astrogliosis (GFAP+ cells) and macrophage activation (ED1+/- MAC-1+ cells) within a 100–230 μm radius [93]. Notably, this zone exhibits marked neuronal loss relative to stab-wound controls, indicating that the continuous physical and biochemical insult of the implant, rather than the initial trauma, drives neurodegeneration. Elevated levels of monocyte chemoattractant protein-1 (MCP-1) and TNF- α at the interface corroborate the central role of prolonged cytokine signaling in mediating chronic tissue damage and functional decline. These findings underscore the critical need for strategies to mitigate neuroinflammatory responses while maintaining the functional integrity of neural implants.

The Impact of Mechanical Mismatch on Neuroinflammation and Strategies for Mitigation

The mechanical mismatch between rigid implants and soft brain tissue exacerbates neuroinflammation, leading to chronic tissue damage. Conventional neural probes with high bending stiffness induce shear stress upon implantation, disrupting local vasculature and promoting glial scar formation. This fibrotic encapsulation acts as an insulating barrier, elevating electrical impedance and increasing the physical distance between electrodes and viable neurons, ultimately degrading signal acquisition quality. While flexible probes with reduced cross-sectional dimensions elicit attenuated immune responses, their rigid counterparts trigger dense glial encapsulation and a pronounced "kill zone" characterized by significant neuronal loss [94]. Recent advancements in brain-computer interface (BCI) technology have focused on minimizing mechanical mismatch and reducing the implant footprint to mitigate tissue damage. Flexible polymer-based devices, such as those fabricated from polyimide (PI) or SU-8 substrates, have emerged as promising solutions. For instance, an ultrathin (1 μm) PI-based BCI device with bending stiffness comparable to that of neural axons [94] demonstrated a substantial reduction in glial activation and neuronal loss com-

pared to bulkier probes, enabling stable neural recordings for over 30 days post-implantation. Furthermore, ultraflexible nano-electronic probes that closely match the mechanical properties of brain tissue have been shown to integrate seamlessly without inducing glial scarring [95].

Enhancing Biocompatibility through Material and Design Optimization

Neurotoxic materials lead to cellular rot and misfortune of neurons. It has been inspected the soundness and cytotoxic impacts of inserts made with gold (Au), platinum (Pt), iridium (Ir), indium tin oxide (ITO), and titanium (Ti) in coordinate contact with the tissue. Compared to a polystyrene tissue culture control, Au, ITO, and Ir appeared no diminish in neuronal movement or development taking after 72 h of coordinate contact. In spite of Pt and Ti tests diminishing the number of living cells, they were not labeled cytotoxic as over 75 % of cells remained [96]. Neural interfacing utilizing Tungsten have been utilized for a few decades. Be that as it may, within the nearness of oxygen or other oxidizing species, tungstic particles have poisonous impacts on the neural tissue close the implantation location. Tungsten's cytotoxic impacts, tall Young's modulus, and hardness challenge its utilize in BMIs [97,98]. Other metals, counting press, silver, copper, cadmium, manganese, lead, chromium, and nickel, appear hoisted neurotoxic impacts, most likely through free radical species formation [99, 100]. Other than metals and metalloids, later investigate endeavors investigated electrically conductive polymer-based microelectrode clusters [101]. These polymers, which can be talked about assist in this survey as potential coatings to upgrade biocompatibility, incorporate polypyrrolen [102], poly (3,4-ethylenedioxythiophene, (PEDOT or PEDT) [57], Poly-vinyl liquor (PVA) (103,104), poly-(lactic-co-glycolic corrosive) (PLGA) [103], Poly-D-Lysine (105), and poly(ethylene glycol) (PEG) (106). Within the form of graphene and carbon nanotubes (CNTs), carbon could be a promising fabric for neuro-prosthetic gadgets [107]. Graphene and CNTs have a tall Young's modulus, are not cytotoxic, and can be utilized to record and fortify neural movement. They moreover advance neuronal multiplication and attachment at the embedded location [108]. The mechanical properties permit adaptable, biocompatible BMI designs. Similar characteristics for silicon microelectrode inserts have been found, supporting their utilize in BMIs just like the UEA [109]. Surface modifications and electrode coatings play a critical role in improving device biocompatibility. For example, platinum-black (PtB) coatings significantly reduce electrochemical impedance while enhancing charge storage capacity, thereby improving signal fidelity. Additionally, optimizing implant geometry such as employing shuttle-assisted delivery systems—can minimize insertion-induced trauma [94]. A notable innovation involves a silicon shuttle with a microgroove structure, which ensures precise implantation of flexible probes while further reducing acute tissue damage [94].

Pharmacological Strategies to Suppress Neuroinflammation

In order to reduce the foreign body reaction and encourage tissue regeneration, pharmacological methods to reduce neuroinflammation surrounding neural implants concentrate on regulating the immune system. These tactics include the use of immunomodulators, cytokine inhibitors, corticosteroids, gene and RNA therapies, and stem cell therapies. Systemic injection of dexamethasone (DEX), a synthetic glucocorticoid that induces pleiotropic antiinflammatory functions through cellular glucocorticoid receptors, was the first way to directly modulate the immune system following microelectrode implantation. DEX is frequently used in the clinic to treat multiple sclerosis. The majority of cells, including microglia, express receptors for glucocorticoids like dexamethasone [110]. Adjunctive pharmacological interventions may further enhance BCI longevity. Minocycline, a microglial inhibitor, has been shown to attenuate TNF- α -induced blood-brain barrier (BBB) dysfunction [92]. However, long-term dosing of minocycline begets an increased risk of adverse events—including hyperpigmentation of the skin and other organs [111, 112]. Minocycline possesses an increased chance of serious adverse events relative to other tetracyclines [113]. Thus, minocycline could be part of a multi-faceted approach to reduce initial neuroinflammation, but less risky alternative therapies are needed for chronic applications. Similarly, localized delivery of anti-inflammatory agents, such as interleukin-1 (IL-1) receptor antagonists, could mitigate chronic inflammation around the implant site [114]. Targeted suppression of pro-inflammatory cytokines, including IL-6 and TNF- α , may also reduce glial activation without compromising the brain's innate ability to respond to genuine pathological threats. alpha-melanocyte stimulating hormone (Alpha-MSH) has been shown

to inhibit both nitric oxide and pro-inflammatory cytokines produced by activated microglia—both of which are detrimental to neuronal health [115]. Although flavopiridol stops cell cycle progression, glial activation has been found to re-enter the cell cycle, as seen by the overexpression of cell-cycle components [116]. Flavopiridol was therefore thought to result in better intracortical microelectrode recording performance and less glial activation. Using a knock-out mouse model, Kozai et al. showed that caspase-1 is a suitable immunomodulatory target for enhancing long-term single-unit recordings made by intracortical microelectrodes inserted into mice's visual cortex [117]. According to data collected by Kozai et al., pharmaceutical therapies that target the inflammasome's downstream actors and components may result in more stable long-term brain recordings. It was shown that employing a knockout mouse model to target monocyte chemoattractant protein1 (MCP1) reduced the inflammatory response to intracortical microelectrode implantation [118]. A chemoattractant called MCP1 draws monocytes to inflammatory sites, such the brain's reaction to a neural electrode. It was previously demonstrated that targeting the toll-like receptor (TLR)/cluster of differentiation 14 (CD14) pathways can improve both acute and chronic microelectrode performance using knock-out mouse models and a small-molecule inhibitor. Pattern recognition receptors are present on microglia, neurons, astrocytes, and blood-derived macrophages present at the probe interface and detect cellular damage and blood proteins [119, 120].

Galectin-3 (Gal-3) is a multifunctional protein implicated in neuroinflammation, microglial activation, and neurodegenerative diseases. Gal-3 is primarily secreted by activated microglia, where it modulates neuroinflammation by interacting with toll-like receptors (TLRs) and other immune pathways, exacerbating inflammation [105]. Inhibition of Gal-3 has shown promise in reducing neuroinflammation and neurodegeneration in preclinical models [121]. After investigating the effects of platinum implantation on neuroinflammation, we found that our antibody SIF001 targeting Galectin-3, a key proinflammatory factor, dramatically reduced neuroinflammatory markers of activated microglia and astrocytes in mice. When compared to an isotype control antibody, our SIF001 demonstrated significant decreases of both the scar tissue encapsulation of the platinum wire and microhemorrhage in brain sections, and it also dramatically increased neurogenesis, implying its potential application in neural implantation [122]. In Platinum wire insertion model, treatment with mSIF001 was able to significantly improves locomotor function test and significantly reduced neuroinflammatory activation of microglia and astrocytes. In addition, reduction in microhemorrhage there was also statistically significant increase in number of neurons by mSF001 Ab.

Conclusion

Neuroinflammation is a complicated, multidimensional problem that has a big influence on how well neural implants work and how long they last. Progress in the field of neural implants depends on comprehending the mechanisms underlying neuroinflammation and creating plans to lessen its effects. The performance and biocompatibility of neural implants can be enhanced by researchers investigating new biomaterials, surface modification methods, and drug delivery systems, which will ultimately improve the lives of people with neurological injuries or disorders.

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