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Neural Pathways To Addiction: A Comprehensive Review Of Drug Mechanisms And Effects

Mohammed Abdullah Albekairi[1], Yassir Abdullah Albekairi[2], Atheer Mohammed Saleh Alsubaie[3], Talal Hamza Alrashidi[4], Roqaiyah Fareed Almabrook[5], Manar Sulaiman Alhusayni[6], Waleed Dhaif Allah Alotaibi[7], Nabeel Ali althabi[8]

[1]Senior Pharmacist, Place of work/ King Khalid University Hospital, malbekairi@ksu.edu.sa
[2]Senior Pharmacist, King Khalid University Hospital, yalbekairi@ksu.edu.sa
[3]Radiology technologist, King Fahad medical city, rs.atheer95@gmail.com
[4]Diagnostic Radiology Technology, Medina National Guards Hospital
[5]Medical laboratory technician, KSU, College of Pharmacy at the University City for Female Students -Pharmaceutical chemistry
[6]Pharmacy technician, King Khalid University Hospital., manar900010@gmail.com
[7]Emergency Medical Services, Saudi Arabia
[8]General practitioner, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This comprehensive review examines the mechanisms of action and effects of drugs of abuse through a multidisciplinary lens, integrating neurobiological, cognitive, behavioral, and genetic perspectives. The article details how various substances interact with key neurotransmitter systems—including dopaminergic, glutamatergic, serotonergic, GABAergic, endocannabinoid, and opioid pathways—to produce acute effects and drive long-term neuroadaptations underlying addiction. These adaptations manifest at multiple levels, from molecular signaling to synaptic function to circuit-level reorganization, resulting in tolerance, withdrawal, and compulsive drug-seeking behaviors. Neuroimaging studies reveal substance-specific patterns of structural and functional brain alterations, particularly in regions involved in reward processing, executive function, and cognitive control. Cognitive and behavioral consequences include impaired decision-making, altered risk assessment, deficits in error processing, and neuroinflammatory responses that may persist long after cessation of drug use. Meta-analytic findings highlight significant genetic contributions to addiction vulnerability, with multiple polymorphisms affecting neurotransmitter systems and neural development pathways. The review synthesizes evidence from recent meta-analyses and systematic reviews to provide an updated understanding of how drugs of abuse hijack neural circuits evolved for reward and learning, producing persistent changes that underlie the chronic, relapsing nature of addiction. This knowledge provides a foundation for developing targeted prevention strategies and more effective treatments for substance use disorders.

INTRODUCTION

Substance use disorders (SUDs) represent a significant global health concern, affecting millions of individuals worldwide and causing substantial societal costs. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) define substance dependence as a disorder characterized by impaired control over substance use, increasing priority given to drug use over other activities, and persistence of use despite harm (Heinz et al., 2022). This definition has evolved considerably since the WHO Expert Committee on Drug Dependence first formalized criteria for drug dependence in 1969, reflecting advancements in our understanding of the neurobiological and psychological mechanisms underlying addiction.

The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) reported in 2022 that approximately 83.4 million adults (aged 15-64) in the European Union had used illicit drugs at least once in their lifetime, with cannabis being the most commonly used substance (EMCDDA, 2022). Beyond Europe, substance use disorders affect populations globally, with particularly high prevalence rates in certain settings, such as prison populations, where a

systematic review and meta-analysis by Baranyi et al. (2022) found that approximately 30% of incarcerated individuals have comorbid serious mental illnesses and substance use disorders.

The impact of substance use extends beyond the individual to affect public safety and societal functioning. For instance, psychoactive drug consumption among truck drivers has been associated with increased accident risk (Dini et al., 2019), while marijuana use has been linked to motor vehicle crashes (Li et al., 2012). Furthermore, recreational drug use impairs cognitive functions, including prospective memory—the ability to remember to perform intended actions in the future (Platt et al., 2019).

This article provides a comprehensive overview of the mechanisms of action and effects of drugs of abuse, examining the neurobiological systems involved, the impact of these substances on brain structure and function, and the genetic factors that influence susceptibility to addiction. By understanding these mechanisms, researchers and clinicians can develop more effective prevention strategies and treatments for substance use disorders.

Neurobiological Systems and Receptor Mechanisms

Adrenergic System

The adrenergic system, which utilizes norepinephrine (noradrenaline) as its primary neurotransmitter, plays a crucial role in the body's response to stress and in regulating arousal, attention, and mood. Adrenergic receptors are categorized into alpha (α) and beta (β) subtypes, each with distinct functions and distributions throughout the central and peripheral nervous systems (Graham, 1990).

Beta-adrenergic receptors (β-receptors) are G-protein-coupled receptors that, when activated, stimulate the production of cyclic adenosine monophosphate (cAMP), leading to various cellular responses. Beta-1 receptors (β1) are predominantly found in cardiac tissue and regulate heart rate and contractility (Alhayek & Preuss, 2022), while Beta-2 receptors (β2) are located in the lungs, gastrointestinal tract, liver, uterus, and skeletal muscle, regulating bronchodilation, vasodilation, and glycogenolysis. Beta-3 receptors (β3) are primarily found in adipose tissue and are involved in lipolysis (Zhang et al., 2022).

Alpha-adrenergic receptors (α-receptors) are further divided into α1 and α2 subtypes. Alpha-1 receptors, when activated, increase intracellular calcium levels, leading to smooth muscle contraction in blood vessels, bronchioles, and the genitourinary tract. Alpha-2 receptors, conversely, inhibit adenylyl cyclase activity, reducing cAMP levels and exerting inhibitory effects on neurotransmitter release (Taylor & Cassagnol, 2022).

In the context of drugs of abuse, stimulants like cocaine and amphetamines indirectly activate adrenergic receptors by blocking the reuptake or promoting the release of norepinephrine, contributing to their sympathomimetic effects, including increased blood pressure, heart rate, and arousal. Additionally, the adrenergic system interacts with the dopaminergic system, which is central to the rewarding effects of drugs of abuse.

Dopaminergic System

The dopaminergic system is perhaps the most extensively studied neurotransmitter system in addiction research. Dopamine, a catecholamine neurotransmitter, regulates movement, emotion, cognition, and the brain's reward system. Dopamine receptors are G-protein-coupled receptors classified into two main families: D1-like (D1 and D5) and D2-like (D2, D3, and D4) receptors (Bhatia et al., 2022).

D1-like receptors are coupled to Gs proteins and stimulate adenylyl cyclase activity, increasing cAMP production. In contrast, D2-like receptors are coupled to Gi/Go proteins, inhibiting adenylyl cyclase and reducing cAMP levels (Missale et al., 1998). These receptors are distributed throughout the brain, with particularly high concentrations in the striatum, nucleus accumbens, prefrontal cortex, and limbic system—regions critical for reward processing, motivation, and executive function (Zhao et al., 2022).

The dopaminergic system plays a central role in the rewarding effects of drugs of abuse. Virtually all addictive substances, despite their diverse mechanisms of action, ultimately enhance dopamine transmission in the mesolimbic pathway, particularly in the nucleus accumbens

(Kaczor et al., 2022). This pathway, originating in the ventral tegmental area (VTA) and projecting to the nucleus accumbens, forms the core of the brain's reward system.

Stimulants like cocaine and amphetamines directly increase dopamine levels by blocking dopamine transporters (cocaine) or promoting dopamine release and inhibiting reuptake (amphetamines). Opioids indirectly enhance dopamine transmission by inhibiting GABAergic interneurons in the VTA, disinhibiting dopamine neurons. Alcohol, nicotine, and cannabis also increase dopamine release in the nucleus accumbens through various mechanisms, contributing to their rewarding effects (Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2013).

Repeated drug use leads to adaptations in the dopaminergic system, including decreased D2 receptor availability and reduced dopamine release, contributing to tolerance, withdrawal, and compulsive drug-seeking behavior (Devoto et al., 2020). These changes persist long after drug use has ceased, underlying the chronic, relapsing nature of addiction.

Glutamatergic System

Glutamate is the primary excitatory neurotransmitter in the central nervous system, playing critical roles in synaptic plasticity, learning, memory, and neuronal development. Glutamate receptors are categorized into ionotropic and metabotropic types. Ionotropic glutamate receptors, including NMDA (N-methyl-D-aspartate), AMPA (α-amino-3-hydroxy-5-methyl-4-isoxazolepropionic acid), and kainate receptors, are ligand-gated ion channels that mediate fast excitatory neurotransmission. Metabotropic glutamate receptors (mGluRs) are G-protein-coupled receptors that modulate cellular signaling through second messenger systems (Reiner & Levitz, 2018).

NMDA receptors, in particular, are crucial for synaptic plasticity and learning. They require both glutamate binding and membrane depolarization to remove a magnesium block and allow calcium influx, making them coincidence detectors for pre- and postsynaptic activity (Henter et al., 2018). This property is fundamental to long-term potentiation (LTP), a cellular mechanism underlying learning and memory.

In addiction, the glutamatergic system interacts closely with the dopaminergic system. Glutamatergic projections from the prefrontal cortex to the nucleus accumbens modulate dopamine release and are critical for cue-induced drug seeking (Stallard et al., 2022). Chronic drug exposure leads to changes in glutamatergic transmission, including alterations in AMPA/NMDA receptor ratios and glutamate transport, contributing to the pathological learning associated with addiction.

Various drugs of abuse directly or indirectly affect glutamatergic transmission. For instance, alcohol inhibits NMDA receptors, contributing to its sedative and memory-impairing effects. Ketamine and phencyclidine (PCP) are NMDA receptor antagonists, producing dissociative and hallucinogenic effects. Additionally, withdrawal from drugs like alcohol, opioids, and benzodiazepines is associated with enhanced glutamatergic transmission, contributing to excitotoxicity and withdrawal symptoms (Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2013).

Serotonergic System

Serotonin (5-hydroxytryptamine, 5-HT) is a monoamine neurotransmitter involved in mood regulation, sleep, appetite, cognition, and sensory perception. Serotonergic neurons originate primarily in the raphe nuclei of the brainstem and project throughout the brain. Serotonin receptors are diverse, with seven families (5-HT1 to 5-HT7) and at least 14 subtypes, most of which are G-protein-coupled receptors (Cortes-Altamirano et al., 2018).

The 5-HT1A receptor, widely distributed in limbic regions, regulates anxiety, depression, and impulsivity. Alterations in 5-HT1A receptor density and function have been implicated in depression and anxiety disorders (Wang et al., 2016). The 5-HT2A receptor, present in the cortex, limbic system, and basal ganglia, mediates the hallucinogenic effects of psychedelics like LSD and psilocybin. The 5-HT3 receptor, unique as a ligand-gated ion channel, regulates nausea, vomiting, and visceral pain.

Many drugs of abuse interact with the serotonergic system. MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, "ecstasy") primarily increases serotonin release and inhibits

its reuptake, producing euphoria, empathy, and sensory enhancement. Psychedelics like LSD, psilocybin, and DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine) act as 5-HT2A receptor agonists, inducing profound alterations in perception, cognition, and mood. Additionally, chronic alcohol use disrupts serotonergic transmission, contributing to depression and anxiety during withdrawal (Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2013).

Long-term use of serotonergic drugs, particularly MDMA, can lead to neurotoxicity, with reduced serotonin transporter density and altered serotonergic signaling. A meta-analysis of molecular imaging studies found significantly reduced serotonin transporter availability in ecstasy users compared to controls, especially in cortical regions (Roberts et al., 2016).

GABAergic System

Gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) is the primary inhibitory neurotransmitter in the central nervous system, regulating neuronal excitability and maintaining the excitatory-inhibitory balance. GABA receptors are classified into ionotropic GABAA and metabotropic GABAB receptors. GABAA receptors are pentameric chloride channels composed of various subunit combinations, with the most common being two α, two β, and one γ subunit. When activated, GABAA receptors increase chloride conductance, hyperpolarizing the neuron and reducing excitability. GABAB receptors, coupled to Gi/Go proteins, inhibit adenylyl cyclase, regulate calcium and potassium channels, and modulate neurotransmitter release (Wu & Sun, 2015).

Several classes of drugs of abuse target the GABAergic system. Benzodiazepines, including diazepam (Valium) and alprazolam (Xanax), bind to a specific site on GABAA receptors, enhancing the inhibitory effect of GABA and producing anxiolytic, sedative, and hypnotic effects. Barbiturates, though less commonly used clinically due to their narrow therapeutic window, also enhance GABAA receptor function but at a different binding site, producing similar but more potent effects than benzodiazepines.

Alcohol (ethanol) potentiates GABAA receptor function, particularly at receptors containing δ subunits, contributing to its anxiolytic and sedative effects. Additionally, alcohol inhibits NMDA glutamate receptors, further enhancing its inhibitory effect on the central nervous system. The GABAergic system also interacts with other neurotransmitter systems involved in addiction, notably by inhibiting dopaminergic neurons in the VTA. Drugs that enhance GABAergic transmission can reduce dopamine release, while those that inhibit GABAergic neurons in the VTA can increase dopamine release, contributing to their rewarding effects (Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2013).

Chronic use of GABAergic drugs leads to adaptations in GABAA receptor composition and function, including changes in subunit expression and receptor trafficking, contributing to tolerance and withdrawal. During withdrawal, reduced GABAergic inhibition and enhanced glutamatergic excitation can lead to seizures, anxiety, and insomnia (Wu & Sun, 2015).

Endocannabinoid System

The endocannabinoid system (ECS) is a complex cell-signaling system involved in regulating a wide range of physiological processes, including mood, memory, appetite, pain sensation, and immune function. The ECS comprises endocannabinoids (endogenous cannabinoids), cannabinoid receptors, and enzymes responsible for endocannabinoid synthesis and degradation (Zou & Kumar, 2018).

The primary cannabinoid receptors are CB1 and CB2. CB1 receptors are predominantly expressed in the central nervous system, particularly in the basal ganglia, cerebellum, hippocampus, and cortex, where they modulate neurotransmitter release. CB2 receptors are mainly found in immune cells and peripheral tissues, regulating immune function and inflammation (Zou & Kumar, 2018).

Endocannabinoids, including anandamide (AEA) and 2-arachidonoylglycerol (2-AG), are lipid-based retrograde messengers synthesized on demand from membrane phospholipids. Unlike conventional neurotransmitters, endocannabinoids are not stored in vesicles but are produced when needed and act as retrograde messengers, traveling from postsynaptic to presynaptic neurons to regulate neurotransmitter release (Zou & Kumar, 2018).

Cannabis (marijuana) contains phytocannabinoids, primarily delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD), which interact with the ECS. THC is a partial agonist at CB1 receptors, mimicking the effects of endocannabinoids but with greater potency and duration, producing euphoria, relaxation, altered perception, and increased appetite. CBD has low affinity for CB1 and CB2 receptors but modulates the ECS through other mechanisms, including inhibiting endocannabinoid degradation and acting on other receptors (Zou & Kumar, 2018).

Chronic cannabis use leads to adaptations in the ECS, including downregulation and desensitization of CB1 receptors, contributing to tolerance. These changes partially reverse with abstinence, but some may persist, particularly with early-onset and heavy use. The ECS also interacts with other neurotransmitter systems involved in addiction, including the dopaminergic and glutamatergic systems, modulating their activity and contributing to the rewarding effects of cannabis and other drugs (Zou & Kumar, 2018).

Cannabis use, especially during adolescence, has been associated with adverse effects on neurocognitive functioning, including deficits in attention, learning, memory, and executive function. A systematic review of meta-analytic studies found small but significant negative effects of cannabis use on neurocognitive functioning, particularly in the domains of learning and memory (Duperrouzel et al., 2020). Additionally, a meta-analytical review of structural brain alterations in non-psychotic cannabis users found evidence of gray matter reductions in the medial temporal cortex, temporal pole, parahippocampal gyrus, insula, and orbitofrontal cortex—regions rich in CB1 receptors (Rocchetti et al., 2013).

Opioid System

The opioid system plays a crucial role in pain modulation, reward processing, stress response, and emotional regulation. It comprises three main receptor types—mu (μ), delta (δ), and kappa (κ)—all of which are G-protein-coupled receptors that inhibit adenylyl cyclase, reduce calcium conductance, and increase potassium conductance, generally decreasing neuronal excitability and neurotransmitter release (Shang & Filizola, 2015).

Mu-opioid receptors, widely distributed in the brain and spinal cord, mediate the analgesic, rewarding, and respiratory depressant effects of opioids. Delta-opioid receptors, found in the pontine nuclei, amygdala, and deep cortical layers, contribute to analgesia and may play a role in depression and anxiety. Kappa-opioid receptors, present in the hypothalamus, periaqueductal gray, and claustrum, mediate analgesia, dysphoria, and psychotomimetic effects (Shang & Filizola, 2015).

Enkephalins, a class of endogenous opioid peptides, preferentially bind to delta-opioid receptors but also interact with mu-opioid receptors. The enkephalinergic system has been implicated in substance use disorders, with alterations in enkephalin levels and receptor function observed in various addiction models. Recent research suggests that targeting the enkephalinergic system may offer potential therapeutic approaches for substance use disorders (Rysztak & Jutkiewicz, 2022).

Opioid drugs, including morphine, heroin, oxycodone, and fentanyl, primarily act as mu-opioid receptor agonists, producing analgesia, euphoria, sedation, and respiratory depression. The rewarding effects of opioids involve direct activation of mu-opioid receptors in the VTA, leading to disinhibition of dopaminergic neurons and increased dopamine release in the nucleus accumbens (Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2013).

Chronic opioid use leads to adaptations in the opioid system, including receptor downregulation, desensitization, and altered signaling, contributing to tolerance and physical dependence. During withdrawal, these adaptations manifest as hyperalgesia, anxiety, dysphoria, and autonomic symptoms, driving continued drug use to avoid these aversive states (Cunha-Oliveira et al., 2013).

Neurobiology of Addiction

Reward Pathways and Pleasure

The brain's reward system, centered on the mesolimbic dopamine pathway, plays a fundamental role in addiction. This pathway originates in the VTA and projects to the nucleus accumbens, prefrontal cortex, and other limbic structures. Dopamine release in these regions signals the

salience of stimuli and reinforces behaviors that lead to rewarding outcomes, facilitating learning and motivation (Devoto et al., 2020).

All drugs of abuse, despite their diverse mechanisms of action, enhance dopamine transmission in the mesolimbic pathway, particularly in the nucleus accumbens. This common effect underlies their rewarding properties and abuse potential. However, the degree of dopamine increase varies among substances, with stimulants producing the largest and most direct effects (Devoto et al., 2020).

Mathematical models of reward-mediated learning in drug addiction suggest that drugs of abuse "hijack" the brain's natural reward circuitry by producing dopamine signals that are more intense, rapid, and reliable than those triggered by natural rewards. This leads to overvaluation of drug-related stimuli and behaviors, contributing to the development of addiction (Chou & D'Orsogna, 2022).

As addiction progresses, the role of dopamine shifts from mediating the hedonic effects of drugs (pleasure) to anticipatory signaling and incentive salience (wanting). This transition is associated with changes in striatal dopamine signaling and receptor expression, contributing to the compulsive nature of addiction (Devoto et al., 2020).

Interestingly, studies have found no significant basal or drug-induced sex differences in striatal dopaminergic levels, suggesting that the fundamental neurochemical mechanisms of reward are similar across sexes. However, hormonal, genetic, and sociocultural factors may influence susceptibility to addiction and treatment outcomes differently in males and females (Egenrieder et al., 2020).

Neural Adaptations and Neuroplasticity

Chronic drug exposure leads to neuroadaptations at multiple levels, from molecular signaling to synaptic function to circuit-level reorganization. These adaptations underlie tolerance, withdrawal, and compulsive drug use—hallmarks of addiction.

At the molecular level, drugs of abuse alter gene expression through various transcription factors, including CREB (cAMP response element-binding protein), ΔFosB, and NFκB (nuclear factor kappa-light-chain-enhancer of activated B cells). NFκB, traditionally associated with immune responses, has been implicated in drug addiction, mediating drug-induced changes in synaptic structure and function. Chronic drug exposure activates NFκB in the nucleus accumbens, leading to structural changes that enhance glutamatergic transmission and promote drug-seeking behavior (Nennig & Schank, 2017).

At the synaptic level, drugs of abuse induce long-lasting changes in synaptic strength (synaptic plasticity) in reward-related brain regions. For instance, cocaine enhances excitatory transmission in the nucleus accumbens by increasing the AMPA/NMDA receptor ratio, a form of long-term potentiation (LTP). These changes strengthen drug-associated memories and cue-induced drug-seeking behavior (Devoto et al., 2020).

At the circuit level, chronic drug use leads to reorganization of neural networks involved in reward, motivation, executive function, and habit formation. Initially, drug use is driven by positive reinforcement (seeking pleasure) and mediated by the nucleus accumbens shell. As addiction progresses, habitual and compulsive drug use emerges, involving the nucleus accumbens core and dorsal striatum. Eventually, negative reinforcement (avoiding withdrawal) becomes a primary motivator, engaging the extended amygdala (Devoto et al., 2020).

These neuroadaptations persist long after drug use ceases, explaining why addiction is characterized by high relapse rates even after prolonged abstinence. Environmental cues, stress, and small doses of the drug can trigger these neuroadaptations, leading to intense craving and drug-seeking behavior (Devoto et al., 2020).

Structural and Functional Brain Changes

Chronic substance use leads to structural and functional alterations in the brain, detectable through neuroimaging techniques such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), functional MRI (fMRI), and positron emission tomography (PET).

A comparative meta-analysis of brain structural abnormalities in attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and substance use disorders found distinct patterns of gray matter alterations, with SUDs associated with reductions in the orbitofrontal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex, and thalamus—regions involved in reward processing, inhibitory control, and salience attribution (Long et al., 2022).

Alcohol use disorder, in particular, has been associated with widespread white matter alterations. A coordinate-based meta-analysis of white matter changes in patients with alcohol use disorder found significant reductions in white matter integrity in the corpus callosum, cingulum, and superior longitudinal fasciculus—tracts connecting prefrontal, limbic, and subcortical regions involved in cognitive control, emotional regulation, and reward processing (Spindler et al., 2022).

Functional neuroimaging studies have revealed altered patterns of brain activation in individuals with SUDs. A meta-analysis of 64 neuroimaging activation studies found that exposure to drug cues activated a network including the anterior cingulate cortex, insula, and amygdala, with activation strength correlating with both the subjective harm and availability of the drug. This suggests that the salience of drug cues depends not only on their association with reward but also on the perceived harm and accessibility of the substance (Devoto et al., 2020).

Molecular imaging studies have provided insights into neurotransmitter system alterations in addiction. For instance, a meta-analysis of serotonin transporter imaging in ecstasy/polydrug users found significant reductions in serotonin transporter availability, particularly in cortical regions, suggesting serotonergic neurotoxicity with chronic use (Roberts et al., 2016).

Cannabis use has been associated with specific structural brain alterations. A meta-analytical review found reduced gray matter volume in medial temporal and frontal regions among non-psychotic cannabis users, with greater reductions associated with earlier age of onset and heavier use. These findings suggest that cannabis may have neurotoxic effects, particularly during critical periods of neurodevelopment (Rocchetti et al., 2013).

Indeed, the developmental timing of drug exposure is critical, as the brain continues to mature into early adulthood, with dopamine receptor density and function changing significantly during adolescence. Pharmacologic neuroimaging studies have shown that the ontogeny of dopamine receptor function continues through adolescence, with implications for the effects of drugs of abuse on the developing brain (Chen et al., 2010).

Cognitive and Behavioral Effects

Decision-Making and Risk Assessment

Substance use disorders are characterized by impaired decision-making, particularly regarding risk assessment and delayed gratification. Individuals with SUDs often choose immediate rewards despite negative long-term consequences, reflecting alterations in brain regions involved in decision-making, including the prefrontal cortex, insula, and striatum.

A meta-analysis of neuroimaging studies on risk-related processing in substance users found an imbalance of pain and gain processing. Substance users showed reduced activation in regions associated with processing potential losses (pain) and increased activation in regions associated with processing potential gains, particularly for drug-related rewards. This imbalance may contribute to disadvantageous decision-making and continued drug use despite negative consequences (Gowin et al., 2013).

Cannabis use, in particular, has been associated with alterations in risk assessment and decision-making. A review of risks associated with non-medicinal cannabis use found evidence for impaired driving ability, with dose-dependent increases in accident risk. Additionally, cannabis use was associated with decreased performance on complex cognitive tasks involving attention, learning, and executive function, which may impact educational achievement and vocational success (Hoch et al., 2015).

Error Processing and Behavioral Adaptation

Error processing—the ability to detect errors and adjust behavior accordingly—is crucial for adaptive functioning. Substance use disorders are associated with deficits in error processing, reflecting dysfunction in the anterior cingulate cortex and related brain regions.

A meta-analysis of post-error slowing (a behavioral measure of error processing) in SUDs found consistent evidence of aberrant post-error slowing across various substances of abuse. This impairment in behavioral adaptation after errors may contribute to the continued use of drugs despite negative consequences, reflecting broader deficits in cognitive control and self-regulation (Sullivan et al., 2019).

These deficits in error processing and behavioral adaptation may be particularly pronounced in individuals with comorbid psychiatric conditions. A selective overview of neurobiological and cognitive underpinnings in comorbid substance use disorder and schizophrenia found evidence for shared vulnerability factors, including impaired error processing, reward learning, and inhibitory control, reflecting dysfunction in overlapping neural circuits (Thoma & Daum, 2013).

Oxidative Stress and Neuroinflammation

Beyond cognitive and behavioral effects, substance use disorders are associated with oxidative stress and neuroinflammation, which may contribute to neuronal damage and cognitive impairment. A systematic review and meta-analysis of oxidative and antioxidative stress markers in SUDs found evidence for increased oxidative stress (indicated by higher levels of reactive oxygen species and lipid peroxidation) and decreased antioxidant capacity across various substances of abuse (Viola et al., 2023).

These oxidative changes may contribute to neuroinflammation and neurotoxicity, potentially underlying some of the cognitive and behavioral deficits observed in substance use disorders. Additionally, oxidative stress and neuroinflammation may interact with genetic factors and environmental stressors to influence vulnerability to addiction and treatment outcomes (Viola et al., 2023).

Genetic Factors in Addiction

Genome-Wide Association Studies

Genetic factors contribute significantly to the risk of developing substance use disorders, with heritability estimates ranging from 40% to 60% across different substances. Genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have identified numerous genetic variants associated with addiction vulnerability, providing insights into the molecular mechanisms underlying addiction.

A meta-analysis and genome-wide interpretation of genetic susceptibility to drug addiction identified several pathways and networks implicated in addiction, including those involved in glutamatergic, dopaminergic, and GABAergic neurotransmission, as well as axon guidance, regulation of the actin cytoskeleton, and adherens junctions. These findings suggest that addiction involves multiple genetic factors affecting various aspects of neuronal function and communication (Li et al., 2011).

Specific genetic variants have been associated with particular substance use disorders. For instance, a strong association has been found between the alcohol dehydrogenase 1B gene (ADH1B) and alcohol dependence, with variants that increase the rate of alcohol metabolism providing protection against alcohol use disorder by causing unpleasant side effects (flushing, nausea) when alcohol is consumed (Li et al., 2011).

Similarly, the gamma-aminobutyric acid A receptor α2 gene (GABRA2) has been consistently associated with alcohol use disorder across multiple studies. Variants in this gene may affect GABAA receptor function, altering sensitivity to alcohol's effects and influencing drinking behavior (Li et al., 2014).

For cannabis use, a genome-wide association study based on a large meta-analytic sample of 32,330 subjects identified genetic variants in calcium signaling pathways associated with lifetime cannabis use, suggesting a role for calcium channel genes in cannabis use and dependence (Stringer et al., 2016).

Specific Gene Associations

Beyond genome-wide studies, candidate gene approaches have identified specific genes associated with addiction to particular substances. The cannabinoid receptor 1 gene (CNR1), which encodes the CB1 receptor, has been associated with cocaine addiction in multiple samples, with a meta-

analysis confirming this association. Variants in this gene may affect endocannabinoid signaling, influencing reward processing and vulnerability to cocaine dependence (Clarke et al., 2013).
The serotonin receptor 1B gene (HTR1B) has been associated with alcohol, cocaine, and heroin abuse, highlighting the role of serotonergic transmission in addiction across different substances. These associations may reflect the involvement of serotonin in mood regulation, impulsivity, and stress response—factors that influence vulnerability to addiction (Cao et al., 2013).
Genetic factors not only influence susceptibility to addiction but also affect treatment response and outcomes. Pharmacogenetic studies have identified genetic variants that predict response to medications for alcohol, opioid, and nicotine dependence, potentially enabling personalized treatment approaches based on genetic profiles (Li et al., 2011).

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive review has examined the mechanisms of action and effects of drugs of abuse, from the molecular and cellular level to behavioral manifestations and genetic influences. The neurobiological systems involved in addiction—including the adrenergic, dopaminergic, glutamatergic, serotonergic, GABAergic, endocannabinoid, and opioid systems—interact in complex ways to mediate the acute effects of drugs and the long-term adaptations underlying addiction.
Chronic drug exposure leads to neuroadaptations at multiple levels, from molecular signaling to synaptic function to circuit-level reorganization, resulting in tolerance, withdrawal, and compulsive drug use. These neuroadaptations are accompanied by structural and functional brain changes, detectable through various neuroimaging techniques, which may persist long after drug use ceases, contributing to the chronic, relapsing nature of addiction.
Cognitive and behavioral effects of drugs of abuse include impaired decision-making, altered risk assessment, deficits in error processing and behavioral adaptation, and oxidative stress and neuroinflammation. These effects reflect dysfunction in neural circuits involved in reward processing, executive function, and cognitive control.
Genetic factors contribute significantly to addiction vulnerability, with genome-wide association studies and candidate gene approaches identifying numerous genetic variants associated with substance use disorders. These genetic factors interact with environmental influences to determine individual susceptibility to addiction and response to treatment.
Understanding the mechanisms of action and effects of drugs of abuse is crucial for developing more effective prevention strategies and treatments for substance use disorders. By targeting specific neurobiological systems and processes involved in addiction, researchers and clinicians can develop interventions that address the underlying mechanisms of addiction rather than merely managing symptoms.
Future research directions include further elucidation of the genetic and epigenetic factors contributing to addiction vulnerability, development of biomarkers for predicting individual risk and treatment response, and refinement of targeted interventions based on a deeper understanding of the neurobiological mechanisms underlying addiction. As our understanding of these mechanisms continues to evolve, so too will our ability to prevent and treat substance use disorders, reducing their substantial human and societal costs.

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