Thyroid hormones in persons with schizophrenia: A systematic review and meta-analysis

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

There is accumulating evidence that individuals with schizophrenia show altered levels of thyroid hormones. However, a qualitative and quantitative synthesis of findings in this field has not been performed so far. Therefore, we aimed to perform a systematic review and meta-analysis of studies investigating the levels of thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH), free thyroxine (fT4), total triiodothyronine (tT3), free triiodothyronine (FT3) and total triiodothyronine (tT3) in multiple-episode schizophrenia (MES) and first-episode psychosis (FEP). Electronic databases were searched from their inception until 30th May 2020 by two independent reviewers. Random-effects meta-analyses and meta-regression analyses were performed. Altogether, 19 studies were included. Persons with FEP had significantly lower TSH levels (5 studies, $g = -0.26$, 95\%CI: $-0.47$ to $-0.06$, $p = 0.013$, $I^2 = 21.3\%$), higher fT4 levels (3 studies, $g = 0.58$, 95\%CI: 0.15$-$1.01, $p = 0.008$, $I^2 = 64.6\%$) and lower tT3 levels (2 studies, $g = -0.60$, 95\%CI: $-0.82$ to $-0.37$, $p < 0.001$, $I^2 = 0\%$) compared to controls. Elevated TSH levels were found in persons with MES (13 studies, $g = 0.20$, 95\%CI: 0.02$-$0.39, $p = 0.031$, $I^2 = 50.0\%$). Our findings imply that the levels of TSH might be decreased in persons with FEP and increased in those with MES. Other alterations need to be confirmed by additional studies. These findings imply the need to monitor the levels of TSH and thyroid hormones from the onset of psychosis.

1. Introduction

Physical health impairments are highly prevalent among persons with schizophrenia and largely contribute to reduced life expectancy (Piotrowski et al., 2017). Apart from cardiovascular diseases, persons with schizophrenia tend to develop several endocrine abnormalities related to the dysfunction of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, release of neurosteroids (Misiak et al., 2018) and appetite-regulating hormones (Misiak et al., 2019) as well as hyperprolactinemia (González-Blanco et al., 2016). Some of these alterations might also be associated with a risk of metabolic syndrome and its single components. The development of certain endocrine abnormalities is associated with individual level risk factors that include poor dietary habits, sedentary behavior and adverse effects of antipsychotics. However, some of them, e.g., hyperprolactinemia, insulin resistance and the HPA axis alterations, can also appear in early psychosis and might be related to intrinsic pathophysiological mechanisms (González-Blanco et al., 2016; Hubbard and Miller, 2019; Lis et al., 2020).

Less is known about the role of thyroid hormones in the pathophysiology of schizophrenia. In response to low levels of thyroid
hormones, including thyroxine (T4) and triiodothyronine (T3), the hypothalamus secretes thyrotropin-releasing hormone (TRH). Subsequently, TRH stimulates the anterior pituitary to release thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) that activates the secretion of thyroid hormones. This regulation is called the hypothalamic-pituitary-thyroid axis and acts through a negative feedback. It is important to note that thyroid hormones play a role in neurodevelopmental processes, such as differentiation of neural cells, synaptogenesis and myelination. Indeed, T4 is the major thyroid gland hormone that can cross the blood-brain barrier; however, T3 can also enter the brain through complex transport mechanisms (Tost et al., 2020). Subsequently, T4 is converted to T3 by deiodinase type 2 in astrocytes, and T3 can enter neurons (Noda, 2015).

There are membrane and non-genomic intracytoplasmatic receptors for thyroid hormones, although the most well-characterized are genomic thyroid receptors (TRs), which regulate gene expression by acting as ligand-activated transcription factors. Notably, T3 exerts biological activity through the interactions with two isoforms TRs - TRβ1 and TRβ2. However, the TRβ1 isoforms represent 70–80% of all receptors and account for most effects of thyroid hormones in the brain, while TRβ1 exhibits more restricted tissue expression pattern in the brain (Bernal, 2007; Ercan-Fang et al., 1996). Although TRs are expressed early (TRα1) and later (TRβ1) in the embryonic development, they are also described as moderate to prominent in adult brain regions, mainly the cerebral cortex and the hippocampus (Bradley et al., 1989).

Thyroid hormones have been shown to affect neurodevelopmental processes, such as neuronal proliferation, migration, differentiation and synapse formation (Dezonne et al., 2015), while in adult brain they interact with glial cells that modulate immune responses, regulate neurotransmitter release, and control neuron metabolism (Noda, 2018). Thyroid hormones are important for modulation of dopaminergic, serotonergic, glutamatergic, and GABAergic networks (Santos et al., 2012).

It has been reported that clinically relevant hyperthyroidism might manifest in people with psychotic symptoms, while hypothyroidism may give rise to mood symptoms that resemble negative symptoms of schizophrenia (MacDonald and Schulz, 2009; Marian et al., 2009; Snabboon et al., 2009). A recent population-based study demonstrated that a diagnosis of schizophrenia is significantly more prevalent in hypothyroid patients compared to controls (Sharif et al., 2018). However, studies investigating the levels of thyroid hormones in persons with psychotic disorders have provided mixed findings. Recognizing the pattern of alterations related to thyroid hormones in persons with schizophrenia might have important implications due to several clinical correlates. For instance, few cross-sectional studies have provided evidence for the association between altered levels of thyroid hormones and cognitive deficits or comorbid metabolic syndrome in persons with psychotic disorders (Ichikawa et al., 2012; Kalinowska et al., 2019; Labad et al., 2016). Therefore, in this study we aimed to perform a systematic review and meta-analysis of studies investigating the levels of TSH and thyroid hormones in persons with schizophrenia and first-episode psychosis (FEP).

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Search strategy

Three reviewers were involved in searches of online databases from their inception until 30th May 2020 (see Supplementary Table 1 for details). Searches were performed in agreement with the PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009), and the protocol of our systematic review and meta-analysis was registered in the PROSPERO database (registration number: CRD42020163283). The PRISMA checklist was presented in Supplementary Table 2.

2.2. Eligibility criteria

Publication records were included if they met the following criteria: 1) reported the levels of TSH and/or thyroid hormones, including free thyroxine (fT4) and/or total thyroxine (T4) and/or free triiodothyronine (T3) and/or total triiodothyronine (T3) in serum or plasma samples; 2) necessary data (mean and SD for the levels of TSH and thyroid hormones, the number of participants and medication status) were available in the manuscript or upon request (corresponding authors of eligible publications were contacted if necessary); 3) case-control studies comparing the levels of thyroid hormones between persons with schizophrenia, schizoaffective disorder or FEP and healthy controls; 4) English language articles. This systematic review was limited to case-control studies due to the fact that these studies often build first evidence between specific mechanisms and outcomes (Tenny et al., 2020). To our knowledge, a qualitative and quantitative synthesis of evidence in this field has not been performed so far. Moreover, the levels of TSH and thyroid hormones are related to various environmental exposures and comorbid physical health impairments that might be difficult to control in longitudinal studies (Ferrari et al., 2017). In case of overlapping samples, data were included from the study reporting results from the largest sample. We excluded animal model studies, studies without healthy controls, non-original studies (e.g., editorials, commentaries and reviews) and studies without necessary data to perform meta-analysis.

2.3. Data extraction

The following data were extracted from eligible publications (mean ± SD or the number of cases): 1) age; 2) sex; 3) body mass index (BMI); 4) the levels of TSH and thyroid hormones; 5) scores of the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (PANSS) (Kay et al., 1987); 6) medication status and 7) the type of assay used to determine the levels of hormones. Data provided as median and interquartile range (IQR) were converted to calculate mean and SD. More specifically, the median was used as an approximation of the mean (Higgins et al., 2019). In turn, SD was calculated by dividing IQR by 1.35 (Hozo et al., 2005).

Quality assessment was performed using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) (Wells et al., 2000). The NOS is a “star system” that enables to assess three categories of quality: 1) the selection of study groups (the maximum score is 4 stars); 2) the comparability of study groups (the maximum score is 2 stars) and 3) the ascertainment of exposure or outcome of interest (the maximum score is 3 stars). The total NOS score ranges between 0 and 9 stars. Higher number of stars indicates better quality. Matching patients and healthy controls for age and sex was considered to allocate stars for the comparability of studied groups.

2.4. Data analysis

Heterogeneity was evaluated using the Cochran Q and I² statistics. Due to anticipated heterogeneity, random-effects models were used and standardized mean difference (Hedges’ g) was calculated as the effect size estimate. Hedges’ g was selected to derive effect size estimates due to expected heterogeneity in the methods used to measure the levels of TSH and thyroid hormones (Ellis, 2010). Moreover, the use of Hedges’ g is recommended in case of small studies (n < 20) (Lakens, 2013). A leave-one-out sensitivity analysis was performed to investigate if any single study contributed to heterogeneity. Subgroup analyses were performed to explore thyroid hormones alterations separately for drug- or antipsychotic-naïve persons with FEP and medicated or unmedicated individuals with multiple-episode schizophrenia (MES). Meta-regression analyses were performed for continuous moderators that were recorded by at least six studies (age of persons with FEP and MES as well as healthy controls, the percentage of males, illness duration and scores of the PANSS) and categorical moderators if each category was represented by at least four studies (type of assay used to determine the levels of thyroid hormones) (Fu et al., 2011). Publication bias was assessed using the Egger’s test in case of analyses based on at least 10 studies (Sterne et al., 2008). Results of all analyses were considered significant if the p-
value was less than 0.05. The STATISTICA software, version 12.5, was used to conduct the analyses.

3. Results

Initial search identified 2582 publication records and 19 studies were finally included in systematic review and meta-analysis (Fig. 1) (Banki et al., 1984; Barbero et al., 2014; Baumgartner et al., 2000; Bičíková et al., 2011; Boral et al., 1980; Bratek et al., 2015; Del Cacho et al., 2019; Extein et al., 1982; Garcia-Rizo et al., 2012; Jose et al., 2015; Lin et al., 2019; Loosen et al., 1977; Petrikis et al., 2016; Prange et al., 1979; Roy et al., 1989; Wahby et al., 1988; Yazici et al., 2002; Zhu et al., 2020). General characteristics of eligible studies are shown in Table 1, while the levels of hormones are presented in Supplementary Table 3. Altogether, these studies investigated the levels of thyroid hormones in 1138 persons with FEP and MES as well as 730 healthy controls. In case of three publication records (Barbero et al., 2019, 2014; Labad et al., 2016), samples were overlapping and the corresponding author was contacted to provide data from the largest number of participants. This sample is further reported as Barbero et al. (2014).

The NOS score varied between 3 and 7 (4.00 ± 1.05, Supplementary Table 4). Persons with FEP or MES and healthy controls were matched for age and sex in the majority of studies, except for five studies (Boral et al., 1980; Extein et al., 1982; Lin et al., 2019; Loosen et al., 1977; Zhu et al., 2020). Only two studies controlled for the effects of BMI (Garcia-Rizo et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2020). In the study by Zhu et al. (2020), persons with FEP and MES had significantly higher BMI compared to healthy controls. In turn, persons with FEP and controls had similar BMI in the study by Garcia-Rizo et al. (2012). There were six studies of persons with FEP (Bičíková et al., 2011; Del Cacho et al., 2019; Garcia-Rizo et al., 2012; Jose et al., 2015; Petrikis et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2020). All of these studies were based on drug-naïve or antipsychotic-naïve persons. In one study, medicated persons with early psychosis were recruited (illness duration shorter than 3 years) (Barbero et al., 2014).

Other studies were based on persons with MES, who had been drug- or antipsychotic-free (Banki et al., 1984; Baumgartner et al., 2000; Boral et al., 1980; Jose et al., 2015; Loosen et al., 1977; Prange et al., 1979; Roy et al., 1989; Wahby et al., 1988) or medicated (Bratek et al., 2015; Extein et al., 1982; Lin et al., 2019; Telo et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2020). The minimum time period without pharmacological treatment in drug-free or antipsychotic-free persons with MES varied between 5 days (Prange et al., 1979) and 2 months (Jose et al., 2015).

3.1. TSH

All studies included in this systematic review and meta-analysis investigated the levels of TSH. Results of the Egger's test did not reach the significance threshold (regression intercept = −0.05, 95% CI = −1.95–2.04, p = 0.960) indicating no evidence of publication bias (see Supplementary Fig. 1 for funnel plot). Pooled data analysis revealed no significant differences [g = −0.001, 95% CI = −0.12–0.12, p = 0.982, I² = 53.65%, Q = 23.7, p(Q) = 0.014] in the levels of TSH between patients and healthy controls (Table 2, Fig. 2, Supplementary Fig. 2). However, subgroup analysis showed significantly lower levels of TSH in drug-naïve or antipsychotic-naïve persons with FEP [g = −0.26, 95% CI = −0.47–0.06, p = 0.013, I² = 21.3, Q = 5.1, p(Q) = 0.279] as well as

![Flowchart of study selection process](image-url)
Abbreviations: CLA – chemiluminescent assay; FEP – first-episode psychosis; FES – first-episode schizophrenia; MES – multiple-episode schizophrenia; NOS – the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale; RIA – radioimmunoassay; TSH – thyroid stimulating hormone; tT3 – total triiodothyronine; tT4 – free thyroxine; UK – unknown.

a Data expressed as mean ± SD or range.
b The levels of hormones reported for 13 male patients and 22 male controls.

Study | Patients | Controls | Illness stage | Medication status | Hormones | Assay | NOS |
|-------|-----------|----------|---------------|-------------------|-----------|-------|-----|
|       | n (M/F)   | Age, years | n (M/F) | Age, years |          |       |     |
| Bani et al. (1984) | 24 (0/24) | 41.0 ± 13.0 | 15 (0/15) | 42.0 ± 11.0 | MES | Drug-free (≥30 days) | TSH | RIA | 4 |
| Barbero et al. (2017) | 70 (43/27) | 24.4 ± 5.2 | 50 (22/28) | 23.8 ± 4.8 | Early psychosis | Medicated | TSH and ft4 | UK | 5 |
| Baumgartner et al. (2000) | 31 (22/9) | 29.2 ± 4.1 | 24 (17/7) | 32.0 ± 4.6 | MES | Drug-free (≥7 days) | TSH, tT4, tT3 and tT3 | RIA | 3 |
| Bičíková et al. (2011) | 22 (13/9) | 32.6 ± 7.4 | 47 (25/22) | 31.0 ± 5.9 | FES | Drug-naïve | TSH and ft4 | CLA | 5 |
| Boral et al. (1980) | 31 (16/15) | 22–52 | 31 (16/15) | UK | MES | Drug-free (≥15 days) | TSH, tT4 and tT3 | RIA | 3 |
| Bratek et al. (2015) | 15 (15/0) | 36.6 ± 7.5 | 15 (15/0) | 37.3 ± 7.8 | MES | Mediated | TSH | UK | 4 |
| Del Cacho et al. (2019) | 61 (38/23) | 24.6 ± 9.3 | 45 (25/20) | 27.6 ± 10.0 | FEP | Drug-naïve | TSH | UK | 4 |
| Exteín et al. (1992) | 30 (22/8) | 26.5 ± 8.5 | 20 (9/11) | 29.9 ± 8.6 | MES | Mediated | TSH and ft4 | RIA | 3 |
| García-Rizo et al. (2012) | 33 (20/13) | 28.6 ± 7.1 | 33 (21/12) | 26.8 ± 7.1 | FEP | Antipsychotic-naïve | TSH | UK | 5 |
| Jose et al. (2015) | 38 (38/0) | 26.8 ± 4.4 | 38 (38/0) | 29.0 ± 4.7 | FES and MES | Drug-naive and drug-free (at least 60 days) | TSH, tt4 and tt3 | CLA | 4 |
| Lin et al. (2019) | 69 (40/29) | 41.8 ± 10.4 | 44 (13/31) | 40.2 ± 8.6 | MES | Mediated | TSH and tt3 | UK | 3 |
| Loosen et al. (1977) | 9 (0/9) | 28.9 ± 2.0 | 40 (0/40) | 35.9 ± 1.7 | MES | Drug-free (≥7 days) | TSH | RIA | 3 |
| Petrikis et al. (2016) | 40 (27/13) | 32.5 ± 9.8 | 40 (27/13) | 32.3 ± 9.1 | FES | Drug-naive | TSH, tt4 and tt3 | CLA | 7 |
| Prange et al. (1979) | 17 (8/9) | 28.0 ± 4.9 | 17 (8/9) | UK | MES | Drug-free (≥5 days) | TSH, tt4 and tt3 | RIA | 3 |
| Roy et al. (1989) | 14 (7/7) | 25.4 ± 4.4 | 14 (7/7) | UK | MES | Drug-free (≥14 days) and medicated | TSH | RIA | 5 |
| Telo et al. (2016) | 63 (31/22) | 44.7 ± 10.4 | 53 (26/27) | 41.6 ± 8.0 | MES | Mediated | TSH, tt4 and tt3 | CLA | 4 |
| Wahby et al. (1988) | 37 (37/0) | 35.5 ± 3.9 | 45 (45/0) | 37.8 ± 1.7 | MES | Drug-free (4–8 days) | TSH, tt4 and tt4 | RIA | 4 |
| Zhu et al. (2020) | 486 (292/194) | 39.3 ± 12.6 | 154 (93/61) | 37.3 ± 8.1 | FES and MES | Antipsychotic-naïve and medicated | TSH, tt4, tt4, tt3 and tt3 | CLA | 4 |
| Yazici et al. (2002) | 58 (35/23) | 32.5 ± 11.4 | 30 (15/15) | 33.0 ± 10.0 | MES | Drug-free (≥7 days) | TSH, tt4, tt4, tt3 and tt3 | UK | 3 |

Abbreviations: CLA – chemiluminescent assay; FEP – first-episode psychosis; FES – first-episode schizophrenia; FES Drug-naïve (≥30 days) and medicated | TSH, tT4 and tT3 | CLA | 4 |

Table 2

Main and subgroup analyses.

| Hormone | Analysis | k | Meta-analysis | Heterogeneity analysis |
|---------|----------|---|---------------|-----------------------|
| TSH     | Pooled analysis | 20 | 0.001 | -0.12–0.12 | 0.982 | 53.65% | 23.7 | 0.014 |
|        | FEP (AP/drug-naïve) | 5 | 0.26 | -0.47–0.06 | 0.013 | 21.3% | 5.1 | 0.279 |
|        | MES (medicated and unmedicated) | 13 | 0.02–0.39 | 0.031 | 50.0% | 24.0 | 0.020 |
| tT4     | Pooled analysis | 8 | -0.03 | -0.62–0.56 | 0.931 | 94.4% | 125.9 | <0.001 |
|        | MES (medicated and unmedicated) | 7 | 0.08 | -0.66–0.83 | 0.824 | 95.1% | 121.9 | <0.001 |
| tT3     | Process analysis | 3 | 0.36 | 0.09–0.62 | 0.009 | 79.5% | 39.1 | <0.001 |
|        | MES (medicated and unmedicated) | 4 | 0.22 | -0.24–0.68 | 0.357 | 85.2% | 20.2 | <0.001 |
| tT4     | Pooled analysis | 8 | -0.55 | -0.76–0.34 | <0.001 | 89.0% | 63.6 | <0.001 |
|        | MES (medicated and unmedicated) | 6 | -0.20 | -0.79–0.39 | 0.504 | 92.0% | 62.4 | <0.001 |
| tT3     | Process analysis | 5 | 0.07 | -0.06–0.20 | 0.293 | 0% | 3.2 | 0.525 |

k refers to the number of comparisons.

Significant effect size estimates or heterogeneity measures (p < 0.05) were marked with bold characters.

Abbreviations: AP – antipsychotic; FEP – first-episode psychosis; MES – multiple-episode schizophrenia; M3 – free triiodothyronine; MES – free thyroxine; MES – total triiodothyronine; UK – unknown.
significantly higher levels of TSH in medicated and unmedicated persons with MES \([g = 0.20, 95\% CI = 0.02–0.39, p = 0.031, I^2 = 50.0\%, Q = 24.0, p(Q) = 0.020]\). Sensitivity analysis demonstrated that after removing single studies from the subgroup analysis of persons with FEP (Del Cacho et al., 2019) or MES (Prange et al., 1979; Roy et al., 1989; Zhu et al., 2020), there were trends toward significant between-group differences in TSH levels (Supplementary Table 5). Moreover, sensitivity analysis revealed that after removing two single studies (Boral et al., 1980; Lin et al., 2019), the levels of TSH remained significantly lower in persons with MES compared to healthy controls with not significant heterogeneity. However, meta-regression analysis (Table 3) revealed no significant moderators in the analysis of TSH levels.

3.2. tT4

The levels of tT4 were assessed by seven studies (Baumgartner et al., 2000; Boral et al., 1980; Lin et al., 2019; Petrikis et al., 2016; Prange et al., 1979; Telo et al., 2016; Yazici et al., 2002; Zhu et al., 2020). The levels of tT4 were significantly lower in the group of patients based on the pooled analysis \([g = 0.55, 95\% CI = 0.11–0.99, p < 0.001, I^2 = 89.0\%, Q = 63.6, p(Q) < 0.001]\). More specifically, this difference was significant in drug- or antipsychotic-naïve persons with FEP \([g = 0.60, 95\% CI = −0.32–1.52, p = 0.199, I^2 = 79.3\%, Q = 4.8, p(Q) = 0.028]\) (Supplementary Table 5). Differences in the levels of tT4 between persons with MES and healthy controls remained not significant after removing any single study (Supplementary Table 5). Moreover, heterogeneity remained significant in sensitivity analysis of studies based on persons with MES. Meta-regression analysis did not identify any significant moderators for the levels of tT4 (Table 3).

3.3. fT4

The levels of fT4 were determined by eight studies (Barbero et al., 2014; Bíciková et al., 2011; Jose et al., 2015; Petrikis et al., 2016; Telo et al., 2016; Wabby et al., 1988; Yazici et al., 2002; Zhu et al., 2020). Pooled \([g = 0.36, 95\% CI = 0.09–0.62, p = 0.009, I^2 = 79.5\%, Q = 39.1, p < 0.001]\) and subgroup analysis of drug-naïve or antipsychotic-naïve persons with FEP \([g = 0.58, 95\% CI = 0.15–1.01, p = 0.008, I^2 = 64.6\%, Q = 5.7, p(Q) = 0.059]\) revealed significantly elevated levels of tT4 in the group of patients compared to healthy controls (Table 2, Fig. 2, Supplementary Fig. 4). Persons with MES and healthy controls had similar levels of tT4 \([g = 0.22, 95\% CI = −0.24–0.68, p = 0.357, I^2 = 85.2, Q = 20.2, p(Q) < 0.001]\). The difference in tT4 levels between drug-naïve or antipsychotic-naïve persons with FEP and healthy controls appeared to be not significant after removing the studies by Bíciková et al. (2011) \([g = 0.44, 95\% CI = −0.01–0.89, p = 0.053, I^2 = 68.4\%, Q = 3.2, p(Q) = 0.075]\) or Zhu et al. (2020) \([g = 0.60, 95\% CI = −0.32–1.52, p = 0.199, I^2 = 79.3\%, Q = 4.8, p(Q) = 0.028]\) (Supplementary Table 5). Differences in the levels of tT4 between persons with MES and healthy controls remained not significant after removing any single study (Supplementary Table 5). Moreover, heterogeneity remained significant in sensitivity analysis of studies based on persons with MES. Meta-regression analysis did not identify any significant moderators for the levels of tT4 (Table 3).

3.4. tT3

The levels of tT3 were assessed by seven studies (Baumgartner et al., 2000; Boral et al., 1980; Lin et al., 2019; Petrikis et al., 2016; Prange et al., 1979; Telo et al., 2016; Yazici et al., 2002; Zhu et al., 2020). The levels of tT3 were significantly lower in the group of patients based on the pooled analysis \([g = 0.55, 95\% CI = −0.76–0.34, p < 0.001, I^2 = 89.0\%, Q = 63.6, p(Q) < 0.001]\). More specifically, this difference was significant in drug- or antipsychotic-naïve persons with FEP \([g = 0.60, 95\% CI = −0.32 to 1.52, p = 0.199, I^2 = 79.3\%, Q = 4.8, p(Q) = 0.028]\) (Table 2, Fig. 2, Supplementary Fig. 4). However, the subgroup analysis of persons with FEP was based on two studies (Petrikis et al., 2016; Zhu et al., 2020). No single study accounted for heterogeneity in subgroup analysis of persons with MES (Supplementary Table 5). Moreover, differences in tT3 levels between persons with MES and healthy controls remained not significant after removing any single study. No significant moderators were found in meta-regression analyses.

3.5. fT3

The levels of fT3 were measured by four studies (Jose et al., 2015; Telo et al., 2016; Yazici et al., 2002; Zhu et al., 2020). Due to low number of studies, subgroup and meta-regression analyses were not performed. There were no significant differences between persons with
Significant moderators (p < 0.05) were marked with bold characters. Abbreviations: CLA – chemiluminescence; fT4 – free thyroxine; TSH – thyroid stimulating hormone; tT4 – total triiodothyronine; tT4 – total thyroxine; PANSS-N – the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (subscale of negative symptoms); PANSS-P – the Positive and Negative Syndrome Scale (subscale of positive symptoms).

(MES or FEP and healthy controls \( g = 0.07, 95\% \text{CI} = -0.06–0.20, p = 0.293, I^2 = 0\%, Q = 3.2, p(Q) = 0.525 \) (Table 2, Fig. 2, Supplementary Fig. 6). These findings and heterogeneity measures remained not significant in sensitivity analysis (Supplementary Table 5).

4. Discussion

Our meta-analysis revealed that drug-naïve or antipsychotic-naïve persons with FEP have lower levels of TSH compared to healthy controls with no evidence of heterogeneity. However, after removing a single study (Del Cacho et al., 2019), only a trend toward significantly lower TSH levels in unmedicated individuals with FEP was observed. Moreover, we found significantly higher levels of tT4 and significantly lower levels of tT3 in unmedicated subjects with FEP. At this point, it is important to note that the analysis of tT3 levels was based on two studies, and thus sensitivity analysis was not performed. In turn, the difference in tT4 levels was not significant after removing two single studies (Bičiková et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2020). The study by Zhu et al. (2020) was based on the largest sample of antipsychotic-naïve persons with FEP (n = 92) and healthy controls (n = 154). In turn, Bičiková et al. (2011) assessed a small and relatively homogenous sample of male individuals with FEP (n = 13) and male controls (n = 22).

The mechanisms of alterations in the levels of thyroid hormones in unmedicated persons with FEP remain unknown. Alterations observed in subjects with FEP (decreased levels of tT3 and TSH as well as elevated levels of fT4) resemble those reported in patients with the non-thyroidal illness syndrome (NTIS) characterized by altered negative feedback between TSH and thyroid hormones. The development of NTIS has been reported in severe somatic illnesses but also in conditions caused by acute or chronic stress, especially in hospitalized patients (Pappa et al., 2011). The NTIS captures deranged profile of thyroid hormones manifesting in low levels of tT3 and/or fT4 (Pappa et al., 2011). In some cases, altered levels of TSH, tT4 and fT4 have been demonstrated (Adler and Wartofsky, 2007). For instance, elevated tT4 levels may appear in patients with NTIS during starvation or prolonged fasting that induce the release of fatty acids inhibiting protein bonding (Lim et al., 1993). Patients with NTIS during starvation or prolonged fasting that induce the release of fatty acids inhibiting protein bonding (Lim et al., 1993). Patients with NTIS during starvation or prolonged fasting that induce the release of fatty acids inhibiting protein bonding (Lim et al., 1993). Patients with NTIS during starvation or prolonged fasting that induce the release of fatty acids inhibiting protein bonding (Lim et al., 1993). Patients with NTIS during starvation or prolonged fasting that induce the release of fatty acids inhibiting protein bonding (Lim et al., 1993).
available evidence is not sufficient to conclude that individuals with FEP show elevated levels of fT4 and decreased levels of rT3 due to low number of studies and the observation that these findings were not significant after removing single studies.

The levels of TSH were elevated in persons with MES with significant heterogeneity. After removing two single studies (Boral et al., 1980; Lin et al., 2019), this difference remained significant with no evidence for heterogeneity. It is likely that the difference in our findings on the levels of TSH and thyroid hormones between individuals with MES and those with FEP is due to greater exposure to antipsychotic treatment. Importantly, our analysis also included studies of unmedicated individuals with MES. However, a minimum time period without medications was relatively short (between 3 and 30 days) and was not associated with effect size estimates for the levels of TSH and fT4. Nevertheless, this observation does not preclude a potential impact of antipsychotics on the levels of TSH and thyroid hormones as some antipsychotics might exert long half-time (e.g., 75 h for oral aripiprazole) (Broder et al., 2012). Moreover, the majority of eligible studies with MES included in our meta-analysis were medicated with antipsychotics (n = 515, 79.5%). It has repeatedly been shown that antipsychotics may impact the levels of thyroid hormones. Vedal et al. (2018) found that the use of antipsychotics was associated with lower levels of fT4 in a large sample of persons with severe mental disorders (n = 1345). This association was mainly driven by the use of quetiapine and olanzapine. Similarly, a large retrospective cohort study demonstrated that acute treatment with quetiapine is strongly associated with the development of new-onset hypothyroidism (Zhao et al., 2021). Other studies have shown that phenothiazine and amisulpride may increase the levels of TSH after stimulation by thyrotropin-releasing hormone (TRH) (Gründler et al., 1999; Khalil and Richa, 2011; Wetzell et al., 1994; Zatelli et al., 2014). In turn, clozapine has been found to decrease TRH-stimulated level of TSH (Paunovic et al., 1991). Furthermore, other medications, including mood stabilizers and antidepressants may also affect the levels of thyroid hormones (Hennessey and Jackson, 1996). A recent population-based study showed increased rate of hypothyroidism in patients with schizophrenia after, but not before, the onset of psychosis (Melmed et al., 2020). However, it remains largely unknown whether antipsychotics directly impact functioning of the hypothalamic-pituitary-thyroid axis. It cannot be excluded that antipsychotic-induced weight gain and subsequent obesity contribute to the development of hypothyroidism. Indeed, there is evidence that obesity may induce thyroid autoimmunity and hypothyroidism (Song et al., 2019). Finally, given that NTIS can appear in the course of severe medical conditions, it cannot be excluded that observed differences in the profile of TSH and thyroid hormones between individuals with FEP and those with MES are secondary to differences in the severity of psychopathological manifestation.

Our study has important limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the majority of eligible studies were based on small samples with questionable representativeness. Certain subgroup analyses were also performed on a low number of eligible studies. Similarly, it should be noted that the effects of some moderators, e.g., symptomatic manifestation or illness duration, were tested by a limited number of studies. Moreover, the majority of eligible studies did not record potential confounding factors, e.g., those related to adiposity, the type and dosage of antipsychotics. It cannot be excluded that these factors contributed to heterogeneity that was high in some analyses. Although we found that quality estimates and bio-healthy controls were associated with effect size estimates for rT3 levels, no significant moderators were found for other analyses. It is likely that due to unavailability of detailed clinical data, we were unable to find other factors explaining heterogeneity. Another point is that we were not able to disentangle whether observed differences in the levels of thyroid hormones are clinically relevant due to a lack of reporting the proportion of participants with abnormal levels of hormones. It should also be noted that we were unable to perform more detailed analyses of medication effects due to unavailability of necessary data. Finally, causal associations between altered levels of thyroid hormones and schizophrenia cannot be established due to a lack of longitudinal studies included in our meta-analysis.

In sum, results of this meta-analysis imply that decreased levels of TSH might be present at the onset of psychosis, while elevated levels of TSH might appear in persons with MES. Other hormonal alterations related to the activity of the hypothalamic-pituitary-thyroid axis require additional, population-based studies, controlling for the effects of various confounding factors. Moreover, longitudinal studies are needed to provide insights into causal associations between thyroid hormones and the development of psychosis as well as to dissect the role of antipsychotics in the development of thyroid disorders. Nevertheless, our observations support the need of monitoring thyroid function from the onset of psychotic disorders.

Author contribution

BM – protocol of systematic review and meta-analysis, online search, data analysis and manuscript writing; BS and MW – protocol of systematic review and meta-analysis, online search; FB and GC – manuscript writing; JS, KJ and JR – corrections and revisions of the manuscript; DF – data analysis and manuscript writing.

Declaration of competing interest

None to declare.

Acknowledgements

Authors are deeply grateful to all corresponding authors of eligible studies who provided necessary data to perform this systematic review and meta-analysis.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnpbpp.2021.110402.

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