Central Regulation of Micturition and Its Association With Epilepsy

Hyun-Jong Jang¹, Min Jung Kwon², Kyung-Ok Cho³

¹Department of Physiology, The Catholic Neuroscience Institute, College of Medicine, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul, Korea
²College of Medicine, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul, Korea
³Department of Pharmacology, The Catholic Neuroscience Institute, College of Medicine, The Catholic University of Korea, Seoul, Korea

Micturition is a complex process involving the bladder, spinal cord, and the brain. Highly sophisticated central neural program controls bladder function by utilizing multiple brain regions, including pons and suprapontine structures. Periaqueductal grey, insula, anterior cingulate cortex, and medial prefrontal cortex are components of suprapontine micturition centers. Under pathologic conditions such as epilepsy, urinary dysfunction is a frequent symptom and it seems to be associated with increased suprapontine cortical activity. Interestingly, micturition can also trigger seizures known as reflex epilepsy. During voiding behavior, frontotemporal cortical activation has been reported and it may induce reflex seizures. As current researches are only limited to present clinical cases, more rigorous investigations are needed to elucidate biological mechanisms of micturition to advance our knowledge on the process of micturition in physiology and pathology.

Keywords: Micturition; Central regulation; Epilepsy; Reflex epilepsy; Urinary dysfunction

INTRODUCTION

Micturition is a complex process finely controlled by the brain and the spinal cord [1]. The bladder functions by either storing or emptying urine. Considering that a normal voiding process takes only less than 5 minutes, the bladder is in the storage mode for most of the time. Switching from one state to the other of the bladder can be modulated by the central neural program. It is known that higher micturition centers including pons and suprapontine brain regions decide whether to void after comprehensive integration of information such as bladder fullness and social appropriateness [2]. This information is then transmitted to the spinal cord and subsequent peripheral nerves so that bladder function is under normal control. Since the voiding behavior transits from involuntary to voluntary processes during the postnatal periods [3], complicated regulation of micturition at cellular and network level needs to be established for proper urination. Thus, it is critical to understand how neurophysiological control of the bladder function takes place.

Many neurological diseases affecting the brain, spinal cord and the peripheral nervous system can manifest urinary dysfunction [4]. For example, cerebral palsy, stroke, head injury, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson disease, dementia, spinal cord injury, and peripheral neuropathy show various urinary symptoms, including urinary incontinence, urgency, hesitancy, and urinary retention [4,5]. This can further help us identify important central nervous system regions for micturition and understand how the voiding process is dysregulated under pathologic conditions.
circumstances. However, there have been no comprehensive reviews of urinary dysfunction in relation to epilepsy, one of the most common neurological disorders affecting more than 50 million people worldwide [6]. As seizures are abnormal and excessive neuronal excitation that can occur in any brain regions, physiologic micturition pathways can be disrupted in epilepsy. Therefore, we will review physiologic mechanisms of micturition first. The current status of the researches reporting urinary dysfunctions in epilepsy and micturition-induced reflex epilepsy is also then discussed.

**PHYSIOLOGIC CONTROL OF MICTURITION**

In human, voiding happens involuntarily until 3 to 5 years after birth. It then becomes a voluntary process [3]. Bladder switches between filling and voiding modes depending on signals from the spinal cord and the brain. At early stages of bladder filling, signals from the spinal cord are main determinants of bladder filling (Fig. 1B, C lower parts). Spinal cord receives sensory signals from the bladder via pelvic and hypogastric nerves informing the tension of bladder wall. It then sends sympathetic, para-

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**Fig. 1.** Brain and spinal networks involved in the regulation of bladder filling and voiding. (A) Major brain regions responsible for micturition are marked on the horizontal section (left) and the sagittal section (right) of the brain. (B) Brain and spinal networks involved in the late phase of bladder filling are shown schematically. Thickness of lines roughly represents the relative strength of signal. Dark grey and grey rectangles in periaqueductal gray represent the contribution of signal inputs from prefrontal cortex and the bladder, respectively. (C) Brain and spinal networks involved in the initiation of voiding are shown schematically. Thickness of lines roughly represents the relative strength of signal. Dark grey and grey rectangles in PAG represent the contribution of signal inputs from PFC and the bladder, respectively. Note the change in relative contribution of signal inputs from the PFC.
sympathetic, and somatic outputs back to bladder [7]. Sympa-
thetic output leaves the spinal cord at the level of thoracolumbar
segments as the hypogastric nerve, inhibiting the contraction of
detrusor muscles and promoting the contraction of urethral out-
et. With regard to somatic outputs, the pudendal nerve leaving
the spinal cord from the sacral segment promotes the contrac-
tion of the external urethral sphincter. Finally, the pelvic nerve
corresponds to parasympathetic output of the spinal cord and it
comes from the sacral segment. In general, increase in both sym-
pathetic and somatic signaling results in inhibition of voiding so
that bladder can be filled. These signaling pathways comprise the
basic spinal reflex mechanism to inhibit involuntary voiding [1].

On the contrary, increase in parasympathetic tone can cause
voiding by promoting contraction of detrusor muscles and in-
ducing relaxation of urethral outlet simultaneously.

At the early stage of bladder filling, sympathetic and somatic
signals from the spinal cord are the main stimuli to fill the blad-
der that is rarely affected by brain activity [8]. However, as the
bladder gets further distended, sensory signals can ascend the
spinal tract and reach higher micturition centers where multi-
ple brain regions interact with each other to sophisticatedly
control bladder filling and voiding (Fig. 1A) [9,10]. In detail,
spinal afferent fibers convey signals of bladder filling states to
the periaqueductal grey (PAG) (Fig. 1B, C upper parts) [11,12].
PAG acts as a relay center for bladder sensory input [13]. PAG
then distributes the information about the bladder filling status
to higher brain centers via thalamus. Insula is one of first targets
of bladder sensory signals reaching higher brain centers. It is a
core part of the interoception [14] and the degree of bladder
filling is encoded here. The signal from the insula can be trans-
mittted to anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) that interprets the
subjective sensation on how much the bladder is filled [15,16].
Although both insula and ACC can cooperate for generating
the desire to void and emotional responses to bladder filling
[17], the feeling of urgency is believed to be mediated by ACC.

However, the urgent feeling does not instantly lead to urination
because the prefrontal cortex (PFC) usually suppresses the
voiding behavior until the socio-emotional situation is accept-
able for voiding. To hold voiding, multiple brain regions can be
recruited to enhance sympathetic and somatic outflow to the
bladder. For instance, ACC and supplementary motor area are
activated to increase thoracolumbar sympathetic outflow [17].
Pontine storage center (PSC) located at the ventrolateral part of
the pons can also send signals to stimulate striated urethral
sphincter activity [1]. Together, these signals eventually en-
hance the spinal reflex to inhibit voiding as described earlier.

Final decision to void can be mediated by PFC, especially
medial PFC (mPFC) that can act through the default mode
network (Fig. 1A) [18]. When the bladder is not full without
strong need to suppress voiding, mPFC sends the signals to
PAG as a default mode of action. This signal is summated in
PAG together with sensory inputs from the bladder [17]. When
the bladder is further filled with desire to void, mPFC will de-
determine whether to void or not. If the situation is inadequate to
void, mPFC is deactivated with decreased signal to PAG (shown
as thin dark grey rectangle). Thus, total neural inputs to PAG
fail to reach the set-point (Fig. 1B). On the other hand, when it
is good to void, mPFC is activated to stimulate PAG (shown
as thick dark grey rectangle) (Fig. 1C). Finally, summed signals
from mPFC (shown as dark grey rectangle) and the bladder
(shown as grey rectangle) can exceed the set-point in PAG, thus
activating pontine micturition center (PMC) located in the me-
dial part of the pons (Fig. 1C) [17,19]. PMC then activates
parasympathetic nucleus in the spinal cord and inhibits sympa-
thetic outflow to the bladder. Parasympathetic input to the
bladder can initiate voiding by inducing both detrusor muscle
contraction and urethral outlet relaxation [1]. Once the urine
starts to flow through the urethra, a secondary reflex in the spi-
nal cord continuously enhances further bladder emptying.

Although we described key brain and spinal circuits respon-
sible for the voiding process in this review, it remains unclear
how continence and micturition are delicately controlled by the
central nervous system. As new brain regions such as parahip-
campal complex and hypothalamus that play roles in comp-
licated voiding processes are being discovered [17], it will be
interesting to identify critical components of higher micturition
centers and their contributions to bladder control for better un-
derstanding of voiding mechanisms.

DYSREGULATION OF MICTURITION UNDER
PATHOLOGIC CONDITIONS

Urinary Dysfunction in Epilepsy

Patients with epilepsy often show urinary dysfunction [20-22].
Despite urinary complaints can be regarded as autonomic signs
accompanied with epileptic seizures, one cross-sectional study
has examined the prevalence of urinary symptoms in epilepsy
[20]. They found that approximately 39% of patients with epi-
lepsy had at least one urinary symptom. Specifically, inconti-
nence was the most common problem, followed by urinary ur-
### Table 1. Urinary dysfunction in patients with epilepsy

| Case No. | Age (yr) | Sex  | Urinary symptom       | Seizure focus by EEG monitoring | CT or MRI | Treatment | Classification of epilepsy                          | Reference number |
|----------|----------|------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| 1        | 42       | Male | Enuresis (incontinence)| Right frontal region            | Not indicated | Not indicated | Juvenile myoclonic epilepsy                         | 23               |
| 2        | 41       | Female | Urinary urge | Left temporal region | Left hippocampal atrophy | Not indicated | Temporal lobe epilepsy                             | 24               |
| 3        | 32       | Female | Urinary urge | Right temporal region | Right hippocampal atrophy | Not indicated | Temporal lobe epilepsy                             | 24               |
| 4        | 14       | Male  | Urinary urge | Right temporal region | Normal      | Not indicated | Temporal lobe epilepsy                             | 24               |
| 5        | 25       | Female | Urinary urge | Right temporal region | Bilateral hippocampal atrophy | Not indicated | Temporal lobe epilepsy                             | 24               |
| 6        | 44       | Male  | Urinary urge | Right temporal region | Right temporal focal cortical dysplasia | Not indicated | Temporal lobe epilepsy                             | 24               |
| 7        | 61       | Male  | Urinary urge | Temporal region, nonlateralized | Right hippocampal atrophy | Not indicated | Temporal lobe epilepsy                             | 24               |
| 8        | 19       | Female | Urinary urge | Left temporal region | Cortical dysplasia of the left temporal lobe | Left temporal lobectomy | Temporal lobe epilepsy                             | 25               |
| 9        | 64       | Male  | Urinary retention | Frontotemporal region | Old ischemic lesions in left occipital lobe, right basal ganglia, and pons | Diazepam | Stroke-induced epilepsy                             | 26               |
| 10       | 56       | Male  | Urinary retention | Bitemporal region | Brain atrophy with no focal lesion | Diazepam | Not classified                                      | 26               |
| 11       | 35       | Male  | Urinary retention | Not indicated | Normal | Diazepam | Not classified                                      | 26               |

EEG, electroencephalogram; CT, computed tomography; MRI, magnetic resonance imaging.

### Table 2. Micturition-induced reflex epilepsy

| Case No. | Age (yr) | Sex  | Stimuli                                      | Seizure focus by EEG monitoring | CT or MRI | Treatment | Developmental disorder | Reference number |
|----------|----------|------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------------------|------------------|
| 1        | 7        | Male | Micturition                                  | Left frontotemporal region      | Normal    | Valproic acid | Mental retardation, microcephaly | 27               |
| 2        | 5        | Male | Micturition, immersion of feet in hot water | Central midline region (C3 and Cz) | Normal    | Valproic acid, carbamazepine | Mental retardation | 28               |
| 3        | 12       | Female | Micturition, emotional response to prayer | Anterior cingulate cortex       | Normal    | No treatment | Developmental delay | 29               |
| 4        | 8        | Female | Micturition                                  | Frontal region                   | Normal    | Phenytoin   | Normal                 | 30               |
| 5        | 6        | Female | Micturition, defecation                     | Frontal and central region       | Normal    | Clobazam, phentoin | Delay in language development | 31               |
| 6        | 14       | Male | Micturition                                  | Right anterior temporal and temporal region | Not indicated | Primidone | Normal                 | 32               |
| 7        | 21       | Female | Micturition                                  | Left frontal region              | Normal    | Lamotrigine | Normal                 | 33               |
| 8        | 11       | Female | Micturition                                  | Bilateral occipital region       | Normal    | Clobazam | ADHD, developmental delay | 34               |
| 9        | 6        | Male  | Micturition                                  | Central midline region (Cz)      | Normal    | Not indicated | Not indicated           | 35               |

EEG, electroencephalogram; CT, computed tomography; MRI, magnetic resonance imaging; ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
micturition plays a role as a relay region sensing the amount of bladder filling and sending a signal of voiding desire to PFC, ictal urinary urge in patients might be attributed to cortical seizures, supporting that the frontal lobe plays a significant role in the regulation of micturition.

Urinary urgency, a relatively rare symptom in patients with epilepsy compared to urinary incontinence, refers to having intense desire to urinate. It has been reported that several patients with temporal lobe epilepsy experience urinary urge during aura or at the beginning of seizures (Table 1) [24]. In addition, one recent case of ictal urinary urge originated from the non-dominant right temporal lobe has been described [25], further supporting previous case studies (Table 1). To localize seizure focus, closer analysis by single photon emission computed tomography has revealed hyperperfusion of the insula and the superior temporal gyrus [24,25]. Considering that insula in micturition plays a role as a relay region sensing the amount of bladder filling and sending a signal of voiding desire to PFC, ictal urinary urge in patients might be attributed to abnormal hyperactivity of the insula.

Urinary retention refers to lack of desire to urinate. Motamed et al. [20] have reported that urinary retention is one of main postictal deficits, different from the urinary incontinence and urgency that are associated with peri-ictal periods. A study presenting 3 cases of patients with epilepsy [26] further supports that urinary retention is a postictal symptom (Table 1). Moreover, EEG monitoring discloses epileptiform activity in the frontotemporal or bitemporal regions, implying that alteration of cortical activity on suprapontine micturition-associated structures might result in postictal urinary retention.

**Micturition-Induced Seizures**

Micturition can trigger the genesis of seizures (called reflex epilepsy). Reflex seizures are provoked seizures caused by a specific sensory stimulus, including visual precipitants, reading, writing, eating, bathing, and thinking. Micturition is one of these stimuli. Although micturition-induced seizures are rare and seldom reported, several clinical cases affecting children and young adults have been reported (Table 2) [27-35]. The presence of normal consciousness was variable as three patients lost their awareness while 2 patients preserved consciousness [27,28,30,31,35]. All cases included variable motor components such as tonic posturing and clonic movements [27-35]. Semiology of seizures indicated that the seizure focus was midline or frontotemporal regions. These data suggest the following possible mechanism of micturition-induced seizures: while voiding, midline or frontotemporal lobe that plays a role in micturition might be excessively activated that seizures are generated shortly after the voiding process. Urodynamic studies can also be helpful to understand how micturition induces seizures as one study reported phasic detrusor overactivity with normal urinary flow despite seizures were not detected during the test [33]. Interestingly, of previously reported cases, many patients had developmental delay, raising the possibility that micturition-induced seizures might be associated with neurodevelopmental abnormalities [27-29,31,34]. To advance our understanding about how micturition is regulated by the central nervous system, more studies are needed to not only demonstrate the basic epidemiologic information, but also determine molecular and cellular mechanisms of micturition-induced reflex epilepsy.

**CONCLUSIONS**

In this article, we reviewed neurophysiological regulation of the micturition and its disruption in pathologic conditions showing seizures. Voluntary control of the micturition can be executed by complex neuronal interactions among several brain regions and the spinal cord. For example, PAG, insula, ACC, and mPFC are known to influence PMC and PSC so that the bladder can switch between voiding and storage modes. Patients with epilepsy displayed various urinary dysfunctions, including incontinence, urgency, and retention, although the micturition itself can also trigger seizures. These patients showed increased activities in the frontal cortex, the insula, and the temporal cortex, supporting that suprapontine micturition centers have critical contribution to fine regulation of the voiding process. However, more extensive investigations are needed to reach comprehensive understanding of all central neural programs controlling micturition as our current knowledge is limited to identifying...
major brain regions with a few pathologic cases.

**AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT**

- Full access to all the data in the study and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis: KO Cho
- Study concept and design: HJ Jang, KO Cho
- Analysis and interpretation of data: HJ Jang, KO Cho
- Drafting of the manuscript: HJ Jang, MJ Kwon, KO Cho
- Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: HJ Jang, KO Cho
- Obtained funding: KO Cho
- Study supervision: KO Cho

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