Lithium and neuroprotection: translational evidence and implications for the treatment of neuropsychiatric disorders

Breno Satler Diniz¹
Rodrigo Machado-Vieira²,³
Orestes Vicente Forlenza²

¹Department of Mental Health, National Institute of Science and Technology – Molecular Medicine, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil; ²Laboratory of Neuroscience (LIM-27), Department and Institute of Psychiatry, University of Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, Brazil; ³Experimental Therapeutics and Pathophysiology Branch, National Institute of Mental Health, Bethesda, MD, USA

Abstract: In the last two decades, a growing body of evidence has shown that lithium has several neuroprotective effects. Several neurobiological mechanisms have been proposed to underlie these clinical effects. Evidence from preclinical studies suggests that neuroprotection induced by lithium is mainly related to its potent inhibition of the enzyme glycogen synthase kinase-3β (GSK-3β) and its downstream effects, ie, reduction of both tau protein phosphorylation and amyloid-β₂₅₄₂ production. Additional neuroprotective effects include increased neurotrophic support, reduced proinflammatory status, and decreased oxidative stress. More recently, neuroimaging studies in humans have demonstrated that chronic use is associated with cortical thickening, higher volume of the hippocampus and amygdala, and neuronal viability in bipolar patients on lithium treatment. In line with this evidence, observational and case registry studies have shown that chronic lithium intake is associated with a reduced risk of Alzheimer’s disease in subjects with bipolar disorder. Evidence from recent clinical trials in patients with mild cognitive impairment suggests that chronic lithium treatment at subtherapeutic doses can reduce cerebral spinal fluid phosphorylated tau protein. Overall, convergent lines of evidence point to the potential of lithium as an agent with disease modifying properties in Alzheimer’s disease. However, additional long-term studies are necessary to confirm its efficacy and safety for these patients, particularly as chronic intake is necessary to achieve the best therapeutic results.

Keywords: lithium, Alzheimer’s disease, prevention, GSK-3β, neuroprotection

Introduction

Lithium salts have been used in psychiatry since the end of the 1940s as a mood stabilizer for the treatment of affective disorders,¹ in particular bipolar disorder and as add-on therapy in treatment-resistant major depression. All major treatment guidelines recommend lithium, alone or in association, as a first-line agent for the treatment of acute mania and bipolar depression as well as for the prophylaxis of recurrent affective episodes in these patients (reviewed by Nivoli et al in 2011).² A growing body of evidence suggests that the benefits of lithium extend beyond mood stabilization. In particular, long-term lithium treatment has been associated with increased neuroprotection against neuronal injury not only in mood disorders but also in neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer’s disease (AD).³,⁴ This article aims to review the presumed mechanisms by which lithium may exert its neuroprotective effects and how such mechanisms may help to delay the progression of AD.

Lithium: pharmacological mechanisms

The specific pharmacological mechanisms of lithium are not clear, but current evidence suggests the direct involvement of classic pharmacologic targets, such as cell surface...
receptors or the direct modulation of neurotransmitters, second messenger systems, and transcriptional factors. Lithium ion directly competes with magnesium (Mg$^{2+}$) due to its similar ionic radii (0.60 Å and 0.65 Å, respectively) and its ability to bind to similar substrates’ sites. Therefore, lithium can inhibit Mg$^{2+}$-dependent enzymatic activity. The competition between lithium and Mg$^{2+}$ by substrate sites has a significant influence on the activity of several enzymes on intracellular pathways relevant to neuropsychiatric and neurodegenerative disorders, eg, glycogen synthase kinase-3β (GSK-3β), inositol monophosphatase (IMP), and Akt/β-arrestin-2.

Lithium inhibits GSK-3β activity by two distinct and interrelated mechanisms. GSK-3β is a constitutively active enzyme by the binding of Mg$^{2+}$ to its catalytic core. By dislocating Mg$^{2+}$ from the enzyme catalytic core, lithium directly inhibits the enzyme activity. In addition, lithium can also inhibit GSK-3β activity by inducing the phosphorylation of the serine-9 residue, leading to conformational changes and inactivation. This indirect mechanism is due to the lithium-induced activation of intracellular kinases (eg, Akt) or by inhibiting intracellular phosphatases (eg, protein phosphatase-2). In addition to the inhibition of GSK-3β activity, lithium can also reduce enzyme expression at the gene level.

The inhibition of IMP and inositol polyphosphate 1-phosphatase activity is another putative mechanism of action of lithium. Lithium also causes a direct inhibition of IMP activity by noncompetitive dislocation of Mg$^{2+}$ from enzyme catalytic sites. An important consequence of IMP and inositol polyphosphate 1-phosphatase inhibition is the significant reduction of inositol triphosphate formation, which leads to the modulation of many intracellular pathways relevant to neuropsychiatric disorders, in particular the stimulation of autophagy (Figure 1).

Another mechanism by which lithium can exert its action is by stimulating gene expression and the release of neurotrophic factors, eg, brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) and vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF).
vascular endothelial growth factor. These effects are particularly interesting as (1) reduced neurotrophic factors play an important role in the physiopathology of AD and affective disorders, and (2) restoration of neurotrophic factors’ levels may be a therapeutic target for these disorders.

**Evidence for the neuroprotective effects of lithium from preclinical studies**

The neuroprotective effects of lithium are due to its modulation on several biologic cascades. In neuronal cultures, lithium significantly reduces tau phosphorylation and amyloid-β production by direct modulation of APP processing and also by inhibition of GSK-3β activity, which decreases inositol phosphatase 1-phosphatase activity, which decreases inositol triphosphate formation and, in turn, stimulates the autophagic processes in neurons. The stimulation of autophagy by lithium leads to the more effective clearance of amyloid-β and hyperphosphorylated tau protein, protecting neurons from their deleterious effects.

Another important neuroprotective effect of lithium is stimulation of the synthesis and release of neurotrophic factors, in particular BDNF and vascular endothelial growth factor. Increased availability of neurotrophic factors protects neurons against amyloid-β neurotoxic effect, stimulates hippocampal neurogenesis, and positively regulates cell survival. These biological effects are accompanied by a significant reduction in amyloid-related pathology, memory improvement, and slow rates of age-related memory decline in animal models of AD.

Inflammation is another important component of AD physiopathology and can accelerate neurodegenerative changes in animal models of this disorder. Lithium can regulate the inflammatory processes by lessening the proinflammatory response. Lithium can reduce the production of interleukin-1β and tumor necrosis factor-α.

**Figure 2** The mechanism and targets of lithium against Alzheimer’s disease-related pathology. (A) The main components of the amyloid-β cascade hypothesis of Alzheimer’s disease pathophysiology. (B) The possible targets and effects of lithium in the amyloid-β cascade.

Notes: Red arrows: activation of pathways; blue arrows: inhibition of pathways.

**Abbreviation:** GSK-3β, glycogen synthase kinase-3β.
Evidence for the neuroprotective effects of lithium from clinical studies

In addition to the evidence for the neuroprotective properties of lithium in preclinical studies, a growing body of evidence corroborates its neuroprotective effects in human subjects as well. Most of the evidence derives from studies of subjects with bipolar disorder. Case registry studies found a lower risk for incident dementia, in particular of AD, in bipolar patients after long-term lithium use.58,59 In a retrospective study, Terao et al found that patients on chronic lithium treatment showed lower rates of cognitive decline as measured by the Mini-Mental State Examination.60 A prospective observational study showed that older bipolar patients on chronic lithium treatment had a significantly lower incidence of AD compared to those with no lithium exposure.61 In this study, the incidence rates of AD in the group treated with lithium was comparable to those observed in the general population,62 suggesting that chronic lithium treatment can be protective against the development of AD in high-risk populations.

The exact mechanisms by which lithium may reduce the risk of AD in bipolar subjects are unclear, but may involve the modulation of multiple cascades that are abnormal in both disorders. Lithium treatment can significantly increase GSK-3β phosphorylation and, consequently, reduce enzymatic activity in the leukocytes of patients with bipolar disorder and recurrent major depression.53,54 The inhibition of GSK-3β in vivo can mediate the therapeutic effect of lithium as a mood stabilizer as well as its neuroprotective effect in humans.

Several studies showed that lithium treatment can significantly increase BDNF, which influences the response to treatment.34,45 In a clinical trial with patients in acute mania, de Sousa et al reported a significant increase in plasma BDNF levels after 4 weeks of treatment. However, increased BDNF levels were not associated with treatment response.66 In addition, maintenance treatment with lithium was associated with a persistent high level of BDNF and reduced risk of affective episode relapse.67

Studies have also evaluated the effect of lithium on inflammatory and oxidative stress markers. Lithium treatment of an acute mania episode was associated with a reduction in pro-oxidative stress markers, eg, thiobarbituric acid reactive substances.68,69 In addition, lithium treatment increased anti-oxidative stress markers and reduced pro-oxidative stress markers in healthy subjects.70 A recent study demonstrated that patients with bipolar disorder who showed a good response to lithium also had a significant reduction in plasma tumor necrosis factor-α level; in contrast, the patients who did not respond well to lithium showed a significant increase in tumor necrosis factor-α levels.71 Lithium can restore the balance in the production of interleukin-1β and interleukin-6 in monocytes of bipolar patients in vitro; this effect is similar to that observed in vivo.72

Another line of evidence that demonstrates the potential for the neuroprotective effect of lithium comes from neuroimaging studies in subjects with bipolar disorder. Structural neuroimaging studies have demonstrated that short- and long-term lithium treatment was associated with increased hippocampal and amygdala volume, and cortical thickness.73–76 In addition, lithium treatment was associated with increased N-acetylaspartate and myo-inositol levels in magnetic resonance spectroscopy.77,78 These neuroimaging findings suggest that long-term lithium treatment may have a significant effect on synaptic density and neuronal vitality in bipolar patients.

Taken together, the findings from clinical studies, in particular with bipolar patients, support preclinical evidence that lithium can modulate several biologic cascades related to the physiopathology and progression of AD. Patients with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) and AD show higher GSK-3β activity.79 Inhibition of this enzyme by lithium may help reduce amyloidogenesis and tau phosphorylation, core features of AD pathology. In addition, lower neurotrophic support is a common feature of AD and stimulation of the synthesis and release of neurotrophic factors can confer resilience against amyloid neurotoxicity and stimulate synaptogenesis and neurogenesis. Finally, increased proinflammatory and pro-oxidative status is common in AD and amplifies the secondary downstream damage due to amyloid-β deposition and tau hyperphosphorylation. The modulation of these cascades can help lessen amyloid and tau-induced neurotoxicity and cell death and, as a consequence, reduce the risk of progression from AD-related pathology.

Evidence of disease modification in AD

Despite the wealth of evidence from preclinical and clinical studies that lithium modulates biologic cascades related to AD and may have disease modifying properties against this
disorder, few studies have actually addressed such potential in patients with AD or MCI. A small open-label trial, including 25 patients with mild to moderate AD, found no significant effects of lithium treatment on cognitive function over a 1-year treatment period. Despite the high dropout rate of this study (only eight patients completed the 1-year treatment protocol), Macdonald et al suggested that treatment with lithium was relatively safe, with most dropouts due to mild and reversible side effects at therapeutic levels. A more recent clinical trial using a microdose of lithium (300 µg daily) over 18 months demonstrated a significant improvement in cognitive performance starting after 6 months of treatment, which persisted until the trial endpoint.

A single-blind clinical trial including 71 patients with mild to moderate AD found no significant benefit of a 10-week treatment of lithium at therapeutic levels (0.5–0.8 mmol/L) on cognitive performance. In this study, Hampel et al also evaluated the impact of lithium on biomarkers related to AD and found no significant changes in cerebrospinal fluid concentrations of amyloid-β and phosphorylated tau and leukocyte phosphorylated GSK-3β levels. Nonetheless, the short treatment period may not have been sufficient for lithium to exert its neuroprotective effects in these patients. Secondary analysis of this trial showed that lithium treatment was associated with increased serum levels of BDNF and that in a subset of patients who had increased BDNF levels it showed significant improvement in cognitive performance. The effect of lithium was selective to BDNF as there was no significant change in the levels of glial-derived neurotrophic factor either on cerebrospinal fluid or serum of AD patients after 10 weeks of lithium treatment.

Recently, a double-blind, placebo-controlled clinical trial was carried out to evaluate whether lithium at subtherapeutic levels (serum levels of 0.2–0.4 mmol/L) could delay the progression of amnestic MCI subjects to AD. It also evaluated the disease modifying properties in cascades related to the core physiopathologic features of AD in MCI subjects. This study recruited 45 amnestic MCI subjects and preliminary analysis of the 1-year follow-up showed that amnestic MCI subjects on the lithium regimen presented stable cognitive performance and lower conversion rates to AD compared to subjects on placebo, although the difference was not statistically significant. Despite the lack of clear clinical benefit, amnestic MCI subjects on lithium showed a significant reduction in phosphorylated tau levels compared to subjects on placebo. Additional analyses revealed that the effect size of lithium on phosphorylated tau levels was even greater in MCI subjects who did not progress to AD on follow-up. Overall, these results suggest that long-term lithium has disease modifying properties on core physiopathologic features of AD and a marginal clinical benefit, mostly if started at the earlier stages of clinical and pathological disease processes.

Are we ready to use lithium in AD? Despite the robust evidence for disease modifying properties of lithium on AD, derived from preclinical and clinical studies, its use is still not recommended. Larger, multicenter, long-term clinical trials are needed to assess the benefits of lithium on cognitive and functional performance as well as its power to delay the progression from preclinical to clinical states of AD. To evaluate the impact of chronic lithium treatment on the core physiopathologic processes in AD, these studies must include, as a primary and/or secondary outcome, biomarkers related to the core features of AD (e.g., cerebrospinal fluid amyloid-β, and phosphorylated tau proteins in structural neuroimaging, and/or amyloid imaging). Also, it is of the utmost importance to evaluate the optimum serum level to combine potential clinical benefit and patient safety.

Another important issue relates to patient safety and long-term lithium use. Older patients are particularly vulnerable to the side effects of lithium, with gastrointestinal disturbances and tremor the most common side effects reported. In general, they are mild and reversible but can be troublesome to patients and are common reasons for drug discontinuation. Also, renal dysfunction (including asymptomatic elevation of creatinine and renal insufficiency) and hypothyroidism can emerge during long-term treatment. They are, in general, manageable medical conditions but often lead to lithium discontinuation. In a safety analysis from a trial in older subjects with MCI, subtherapeutic doses of lithium (0.2–0.4 mmol/L) were safe and there were no significant changes in laboratory parameters related to renal and thyroid function, hematologic parameters, and energetic metabolism.

Drug interaction is another major concern. Concomitant use of lithium with some drugs can potentiate the adverse events related to lithium either by increasing serum drug levels (e.g., thiazide diuretics) or by potentiating renal dysfunction (e.g., nonsteroidal antiinflammatory drugs). However, the use of subtherapeutic levels can minimize such risks.

Conclusion Current evidence points to a potential role of lithium as a drug with disease modifying properties in AD. Nonetheless, it is very important to emphasize that the risk/benefit ratio of using lithium for neuroprotection is still very unclear and
lithium should not yet be used for neuroprotection in older adults. Additional clinical trials are necessary to establish its efficacy from the clinical and biological perspective and also to establish the optimal dose regimen/plasma levels and length of drug use to attain the best clinical benefit.

Disclosure
The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

References
1. Cade JF. Lithium salts in the treatment of psychotic excitement. Med J Aust. 1949;2(10):349–352.
2. Nivoli AM, Colom F, Murr A, et al. New treatment guidelines for acute bipolar depression: a systematic review. J Affect Disord. 2011;129(1–3):14–26.
3. Machado-Vieira R, Manji HK, Zarate CA Jr. The role of lithium in the treatment of bipolar disorder: convergent evidence for neurotrophic effects as a unifying hypothesis. Bipolar Disord. 2009;11(Suppl 2):92–109.
4. Forlenza OV, de Paula VI, Machado-Vieira R, Diniz BS, Gattaz WF. Does lithium prevent Alzheimer’s disease? Drugs Aging. 2012;29(5):335–342.
5. Pasquali L, Busceti CL, Fulceri F, Paparelli A, Forneri F. Intracerebral pathways underlying the effects of lithium. Behav Pharmacol. 2010;21(5–6):985–966.
6. Klein PS, Melton DA. A molecular mechanism for the effect of lithium on development. Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A. 1996;93(16):8455–8459.
7. Ryves WJ, Hardwood AJ. Lithium inhibits glycogen synthase kinase-3β by competition for magnesium. Biochem Biophys Res Commun. 2001;280(3):720–725.
8. Birch NJ. Lithium and magnesium-dependent enzymes [letter]. Lancet. 1974;2(788):965–966.
9. Klein PS, Melton DA. A molecular mechanism for the effect of lithium on development. Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A. 1996;93(16):8455–8459.
10. Ryves WJ, Hardwood AJ. Lithium inhibits glycogen synthase kinase-3β by competition for magnesium. Biochem Biophys Res Commun. 2001;280(3):720–725.
11. Chalecka-Franaszek E, Chuang DM. Lithium activates the serine/threonine kinase Akt-1 and suppresses glutamate-induced inhibition of Akt-1 activity in neurons. Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A. 1999;96(15):8745–8750.
12. O’Brien WT, Huang J, Buccafusca R, et al. Glycogen synthase kinase-3 is essential for β-arrestin-2 complex formation and lithium-sensitive behaviors in mice. J Clin Invest. 2011;121(9):3756–3762.
13. Pan JQ, Lewis MC, Ketterman JK, et al. Akt kinase activity is required for lithium to modulate mood-related behaviors in mice. Neuropsychopharmacology. 2011;36(7):1397–1411.
14. Mendes CT, Mury PB, de Sa Moreira E, et al. Lithium reduces Gsk3β mRNA levels: implications for Alzheimer disease. Arch Psychiatr Clin Neurosci. 2009;259(1):16–22.
15. Patel S, Yemush L, Rodriguez PL, Serrano R, Blundell TL. Crystal structure of an enzyme displaying both inositol-polyphosphate-1-phosphatase and 3′-phosphoadenosine-5′-phosphate phosphatase activities: a novel target of lithium therapy. J Mol Biol. 2002;315(4):677–685.
16. Sarkar S, Floto RA, Berger Z, et al. Lithium induces autophagy by inhibiting inositol monophosphate. J Cell Biol. 2005;170(7):1101–1111.
17. Sugawara H, Iwamoto K, Bundo M, et al. Effect of mood stabilizers on gene expression in lymphoblastoid cells. J Neural Transm. 2010;117(2):155–164.
18. Yasuda S, Liang MH, Marinova Z, Yahyavi A, Chuang DM. The mood stabilizers lithium and valproate selectively activate the promoter IV of brain-derived neurotrophic factor in neurons. Mol Psychiatry. 2009;14(1):51–59.
19. Fu ZQ, Yang Y, Song J, et al. LiCl attenuates thapsigargin-induced tau hyperphosphorylation by inhibiting GSK-3β in vivo and in vitro. J Alzheimers Dis. 2010;21(4):1107–1117.
20. Takahashi M, Yasutake K, Tomizawa K. Lithium inhibits neurite growth and tau protein kinase II/glycogen synthase kinase-3β-dependent phosphorylation of juvenile tau in cultured hippocampal neurons. J Neurochem. 1999;73(5):2073–2083.
21. Esselmann H, Maler JM, Kunz N, et al. Lithium decreases secretion of Aβ1-42 and C-truncated species Aβ1-37/38/39/40 in chicken telenephric cultures but specifically increases intracellular Aβ1-38. Neurodegener Dis. 2004;1(4–5):236–241.
22. Phiel CJ, Wilson CA, Lee VM, Klein PS. GSK-3α regulates production of Alzheimer’s disease amyloid-β peptides. Nature. 2003;423(6938):435–439.
23. Alvarez G, Munoz-Montano JR, Satrustegui J, Avila J, Bogonez E, Diaz-Nido J. Lithium protects cultured neurons against β-amyloid-induced neurodegeneration. FEBS Lett. 1999;453(3):260–264.
24. Alvarez G, Munoz-Montano JR, Satrustegui J, Avila J, Bogonez E, Diaz-Nido J. Regulation of tau phosphorylation and protection against β-amyloid-induced neurodegeneration by lithium. Possible implications for Alzheimer’s disease. Bipolar Disord. 2002;4(3):153–165.
25. Hashimoto R, Senatorov V, Kanai H, Leeds P, Chuang DM. Lithium stimulates progenitor proliferation in cultured brain neurons. Neuroscience. 2003;117(1):55–61.
26. Kim JS, Chang MY, Yu IT, et al. Lithium selectively increases neuronal differentiation of hippocampal neural progenitor cells both in vitro and in vivo. J Neurochem. 2004;89(2):324–336.
27. Chen CL, Lin CF, Chiang CW, Jan MS, Lin YS. Lithium inhibits ceramide- and etoposide-induced protein phosphatase 2A methylation, Bcl-2 dephosphorylation, caspase-2 activation, and apoptosis. Mol Pharmacol. 2006;70(2):510–516.
28. Ghiribi O, Herman MM, Spaulding NK, Savory J. Lithium inhibits aluminum-induced apoptosis in rabbit hippocampus, by preventing cytochrome c translocation, Bcl-2 decrease, Bax elevation and caspase-3 activation. J Neurochem. 2002;82(1):137–145.
29. Hooper C, Killick R, Lovestone S. The GSK3 hypothesis of Alzheimer’s disease. J Neurochem. 2008;104(6):1433–1439.
30. Engel T, Goni-Oliver P, Lucas JJ, Avila J, Hernandez F. Chronic lithium administration to FTD-17 tau and GSK-3β overexpressing mice prevents tau hyperphosphorylation and neurofibrillary tangle formation, but pre-formed neurofibrillary tangles do not revert. J Neurochem. 2006;99(6):1445–1455.
31. Leroy K, Ando K, Heraud C, et al. Lithium treatment arrests the development of neurofibrillary tangles in mutant tau transgenic mice with advanced neurofibrillary pathology. J Alzheimers Dis. 2010;19(2):705–719.
32. Lovestone S, Davis DR, Webster MT, et al. Lithium reduces tau phosphorylation: effects in living cells and in neurons at therapeutic concentrations. Biol Psychiatry. 1999;45(8):995–1003.
33. Noble W, Planel E, Zehr C, et al. Inhibition of glycogen synthase kinase-3β by lithium correlates with reduced tauopathy and degeneration in vivo. Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A. 2005;102(19):6990–6995.
34. Rockenstein E, Torrance M, Adame A, et al. Neuroprotective effects of regulators of the glycogen synthase kinase-3β signaling pathway in a transgenic model of Alzheimer’s disease are associated with reduced amyloid precursor protein phosphorylation. J Neurosci. 2007;27(8):1981–1991.
35. Su Y, Ryder J, Li B, et al. Lithium, a common drug for bipolar disorder treatment, regulates amyloid-β precursor protein processing. Biochemistry. 2004;43(22):6899–6908.
36. Yu F, Zhang Y, Chuang DM. Lithium reduces BACE1 overexpression, β amyloid accumulation, and spatial learning deficits in mice with traumatic brain injury. J Neurotrauma. 2012;29(13):2342–2351.
37. Zhang X, Heng X, Li T, et al. Long-term treatment with lithium alleviates memory deficits and reduces amyloid-β production in an aged Alzheimer’s disease transgenic mouse model. J Alzheimers Dis. 2011;24(4):739–749.

38. Fiorentini A, Rosi MC, Grossi C, Lucarini I, Casamenti F. Lithium improves hippocampal neurogenesis, neuropathology and cognitive functions in APP mutant mice. PLoS One. 2010;5(12):e14382.

39. Rametti A, Esclaire F, Yáñez C, Cogne N, Terro F. Lithium down-regulates tau in cultured cortical neurons: a possible mechanism of neuroprotection. Neurosci Lett. 2008;434(1):93–98.

40. Contestabile A, Greco B, Ghezzi D, Tucci V, Benfenati F, Gasparini L. Lithium rescues synaptic plasticity and memory in Down syndrome mice. J Clin Invest. 2013;123(1):348–361.

41. Hooper C, Markevich V, Plattner F, et al. Glycogen synthase kinase-3 inhibition is integral to long-term potentiation. Eur J Neurosci. 2007;25(1):81–86.

42. Nocjar C, Hammonds MD, Shim SS. Chronic lithium treatment magnifies learning in rats. Neuroscience. 2007;150(4):774–788.

43. Shim SS, Hammonds MD, Ganoczy SJ, Calabrese JR. Effects of sub-chronic lithium treatment on synaptic plasticity in the dentate gyrus of rat hippocampal slices. Prog Neuropharmacol Biol Psychiatry. 2007;31(2–3):343–347.

44. Votyovych H, Kravanevko L, Ziemann U. Lithium: a switch from LTP to LTD-like plasticity in human cortex. Neuropharmacology. 2012;63(2):274–279.

45. Cheung ZH, Ip NY. Autophagy deregulation in neurodegenerative diseases – recent advances and future perspectives. J Neurochem. 2011;118(3):317–325.

46. Ravikumar B, Rubinsztein DC. Can autophagy protect against neurodegeneration caused by aggregate-prone proteins? Neuroreport. 2004;15(16):2443–2445.

47. Rubinsztein DC. The roles of intracellular protein-degradation pathways in neurodegeneration. Nature. 2006;443(7113):780–786.

48. Li Q, Li H, Roughton K, et al. Lithium reduces apoptosis and autophagy after neonatal hypoxia-ischemia. Cell Death Dis. 2010;1:e56.

49. Shimada K, Mooto Y, Ishiguro K, et al. Long-term oral lithium treatment attenuates motor disturbance in tauopathy model mice: implications of autophagy promotion. Neurobiol Dis. 2012;46(1):101–108.

50. Burger S, Noack M, Kirazov LP, et al. Vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) affects processing of amyloid precursor protein and β-amyloidogenesis in brain slice cultures derived from transgenic Tg2576 mouse brain. Int J Dev Neurosci. 2009;27(6):517–523.

51. Nagahara AH, Merrill DA, Coppola G, et al. Neurprotective effects of brain-derived neurotrophic factor in rodent and primate models of Alzheimer’s disease. Nat Med. 2009;15(3):331–337.

52. Patel NS, Mathura VS, Bachmeier C, et al. Alzheimer’s β-amyloid peptide blocks vascular endothelial growth factor mediated signaling via direct interaction with VEGFR-2. J Neurochem. 2010;112(1):66–76.

53. Tong L, Balazs R, Thornton PL, Cotman CW. β-Amyloid peptide at sublethal concentrations downregulates brain-derived neurotrophic factor functions in cultured cortical neurons. J Neurosci. 2004;24(30):6799–6809.

54. Sy M, Kitaaza M, Medeiros R, et al. Inflammation induced by infection potentiates tau pathological features in transgenic mice. Am J Pathol. 2011;178(6):2811–2822.

55. Nahman S, Belmaker RH, Azab AN. Effects of lithium on lipopolysaccharide-induced inflammation in rat primary glia cells. Innate Immun. 2012;18(3):447–458.

56. Li H, Li Q, Du X, et al. Lithium-mediated long-term neuroprotection in neonatal rat hypoxia-ischemia is associated with antiinflammatory effects and enhanced proliferation and survival of neural stem/progenitor cells. J Cereb Blood Flow Metab. 2011;31(10):2106–2115.

57. Basselin M, Villacreses NE, Lee HH, Bell JM, Rapoport SI. Chronic lithium administration attenuates up-regulated brain arachidonic acid metabolism in a rat model of neuroinflammation. J Neurochem. 2007;102(3):761–772.

58. Kessing LV, Sondergaard L, Forman JL, Andersen PK. Lithium treatment and risk of dementia. Arch Gen Psychiatry. 2008;65(11):1331–1335.

59. Kessing LV, Forman JL, Andersen PK. Does lithium protect against dementia? Bipolar Disord. 2010;12(1):87–94.

60. Terao T, Nakano H, Inoue Y, Okamoto T, Nakamura J, Iwata N. Lithium and dementia: a preliminary study. Prog Neuropsychopharmacol Biol Psychiatry. 2006;30(6):1125–1128.

61. Nunes PV, Vordenza OR, Gattaz WE. Lithium and risk for Alzheimer’s disease in elderly patients with bipolar disorder. Br J Psychiatry. 2007;190:359–360.

62. Nitrini R, Caramelli P, Herrera F J, et al. Incidence of dementia in a community-dwelling Brazilian population. Alzheimer Dis Assoc Disord. 2004;18(4):241–246.

63. Polter A, Beurl el Y, Yang S, et al. Deficiency in the inhibitory serine-phosphorylation of glycogen synthase kinase-3 increases sensitivity to mood disturbances. Neuropsychopharmacology. 2010;35(8):1761–1774.

64. Li X, Friedman AB, Zhu W, et al. Lithium regulates glycogen synthase kinase-3β in human peripheral blood mononuclear cells: implication in the treatment of bipolar disorder. Biol Psychiatry. 2007;61(2):216–222.

65. Rybakowski JK, Suwalska A. Excellent lithium responders have normal cognitive functions and plasma BDNF levels. Int J Neuropsychopharmacol. 2010;13(5):617–622.

66. de Sousa RT, van de Bilt MT, Diniz BS, et al. Lithium increases plasma brain-derived neurotrophic factor in acute bipolar mania: a preliminary 4-week study. Neurosci Lett. 2011;494(1):54–56.

67. Suwalska A, Sobieska M, Rybakowski JK. Serum brain-derived neurotrophic factor in euthymic bipolar patients on prophylactic lithium therapy. Neuropsychobiology. 2010;62(4):229–234.

68. Aliyazicioglu R, Kural B, Colak M, Karahan SC, Ayvaz S, Deger O. Treatment with lithium, alone or in combination with olanzapine, relieves oxidative stress but increases atherogenic lipids in bipolar disorder. Tohoku J Exp Med. 2007;213(1):79–87.

69. Machado-Vieira R, Andreazza AC, Viale CI, et al. Oxidative stress parameters in unmedicated and treated bipolar subjects during initial manic episode: a possible role for lithium antioxidant effects. Neurosci Lett. 2007;421(1):33–36.

70. Khairouva R, Pawar R, Salvador G, et al. Effects of lithium on oxidative stress parameters in healthy subjects. Mol Med Rep. 2012;5(2):680–682.

71. Gulkosz S, Altinbas K, Actas Cetin E, et al. Evidence for an association between tumor necrosis factor-α levels and lithium response. J Affect Disord. 2012;143(1–3):148–152.

72. Kniff EM, Breunis MN, Kupka RW, et al. An imbalance in the production of IL-1β and IL-6 by monocytes of bipolar patients: restoration by lithium treatment. Bipolar Disord. 2007;9(7):743–753.

73. Foland LC, Altschuler LL, Sugar CA, et al. Increased volume of the amygdala and hippocampus in bipolar patients treated with lithium. Neuroreport. 2008;19(2):221–224.

74. Germana C, Kempston MJ, Sarnicola A, et al. The effects of lithium and anticonvulsants on brain structure in bipolar disorder. Acta Psychiatr Scand. 2010;122(6):481–487.

75. Moore GJ, Cortese BM, Glitz DA, et al. A longitudinal study of the effects of lithium treatment on prefrontal and subgenual prefrontal gray matter volume in treatment-responsive bipolar disorder patients. J Clin Psychiatry. 2009;70(5):699–705.

76. Yucel K, McKinnon MC, Taylor VH, et al. Bilateral hippocampal volume increases after long-term lithium treatment in patients with bipolar disorder: a longitudinal MRI study. Psychiatry. 2007;195(3):357–367.

77. Forrester BP, Finn CT, Berlow YA, Wardrop M, Renshaw PF, Moore CM. Brain lithium, N-acetyl aspartate and myo-inositol levels in older adults with bipolar disorder treated with lithium: a lithium-7 and proton magnetic resonance spectroscopy study. Bipolar Disord. 2008;10(6):691–700.
78. Silverstone PH, Wu RH, O’Donnell T, Ulrich M, Asghar SJ, Hanstock CC. Chronic treatment with lithium, but not sodium valproate, increases cortical N-acetyl-aspartate concentrations in euthymic bipolar patients. Int Clin Psychopharmacol. 2003;18(2):73–79.

79. Forlenza OV, Torres CA, Talib LL, et al. Increased platelet GSK3β activity in patients with mild cognitive impairment and Alzheimer’s disease. J Psychiatr Res. 2011;45(2):220–224.

80. Macdonald A, Briggs K, Poppe M, Higgins A, Velayudhan L, Lovestone S. A feasibility and tolerability study of lithium in Alzheimer’s disease. Int J Geriatr Psychiatry. 2008;23(7):704–711.

81. Nunes MA, Viel TA, Buck HS. Microdose lithium treatment stabilized cognitive impairment in patients with Alzheimer’s disease. Curr Alzheimer Res. 2013;10(1):104–107.

82. Hampel H, Ewers M, Burger K, et al. Lithium trial in Alzheimer’s disease: a randomized, single-blind, placebo-controlled, multicenter 10-week study. J Clin Psychiatry. 2009;70(6):922–931.

83. Leyhe T, Eschweiler GW, Stransky E, et al. Increase of BDNF serum concentration in lithium treated patients with early Alzheimer’s disease. J Alzheimers Dis. 2009;16(3):649–656.

84. Straten G, Saur R, Laske C, et al. Influence of lithium treatment on GDNF serum and CSF concentrations in patients with early Alzheimer’s disease. Curr Alzheimer Res. 2011;8(8):853–859.

85. Forlenza OV, Diniz BS, Radanovic M, Santos FS, Talib LL, Gattaz WF. Disease-modifying properties of long-term lithium treatment for amnestic mild cognitive impairment: randomised controlled trial. Br J Psychiatry. 2011;198(5):351–356.

86. Aprahamian I, Santos FS, Santos B, et al. Long-term, low-dose lithium treatment does not impair renal function in the elderly: a two-year placebo-controlled trial followed by single-blind extension. Br J Psychiatry. In press 2013.