Journal of Population Therapeutics & Clinical Pharmacology

RESEARCH ARTICLE
DOI: 10.53555/1k4d4689

POTENTIAL NICOTINIC RECEPTOR ANTAGONISTS: CHEMISTRY, RATIONALE, AND RESEARCH ROADMAP

Vyas Mitali Virendrabhai[1], Dr. Nishkruti R. Mehta[2*], Khinya Ram[3], Dr. Pragnesh Patani[4]

[1]Student, Khyati College of Pharmacy, Palodiya, Ahmedabad
[2*]Professor & Head, Department of Pharmacology, Khyati College of Pharmacy, Palodiya, Ahmedabad
[3]Assitant Professor, Department of Pharmacology, Khyati College of Pharmacy, Palodiya, Ahmedabad
[4]Principal, Khyati College of Pharmacy, Palodiya, Ahmedabad

[*]**Corresponding Author:** Dr. Nishkruti R. Mehta
[*]HOD, Department of Pharmacology, Khyati College of Pharmacy, Palodiya, Ahmedabad
[*]Email: Nishkrutimehta@gmail.com

Abstract:
Background: Nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) are ligand-gated ion channels that regulate a wide array of physiological functions, such as cognition, pain, and autonomic functions. Their pathological activity has been associated with numerous disorders, including addiction, neurodegenerative diseases, and chronic pain. In spite of the nAChR's central role in physiological and pathological conditions, there are few effective and selective nAChR antagonists under development, primarily because of the variety of receptor subtypes and complex functional roles.
Objective: The objective of this study is to examine the current state of chemical agents acting as nicotinic receptor antagonists, to provide the scientific rationale for their development, and to establish a roadmap for moving forward in future research towards antagonists for clinical use.
Methods: A thorough review of literature was conducted that looked at chemical structure, binding characteristics, and functional effects of existing and potential new nicotinic receptor antagonists. Comparisons were then made of selective receptor subtype properties, pharmacological properties, and possible use as a treatment to illustrate trends and obstacles.
Results: Antagonistic activity at various nAChR subtypes is exhibited by diverse chemical classes including natural alkaloids, synthetic small molecules, or peptide-based components. Receptor modeling and high-throughput screening techniques have increased the number of selective antagonists; however, clinical translation is still hampered by low bioavailability, non-specific binding, and ever-changing subtype characterization.
Conclusions: The evolution of selective nicotinic receptor antagonists is still a promising but complex one, and it would be beneficial to incorporate structural and pharmacological research progress to inform a targeted research agenda that will focus on specificity, improved drug-like properties, and stronger preclinical assessment in an effort to expedite the innovation of therapeutics.

Keywords: Nicotinic acetylcholine receptor, receptor antagonists, subtype selectivity, medicinal chemistry, drug discovery, neurological disorders, pharmacology.

1. Introduction

Nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) are a diverse family of ligand-gated ion channels that play a crucial role in fast synaptic transmission throughout the central and peripheral nervous systems.(1) These receptors are activated by the endogenous neurotransmitter acetylcholine as well as exogenous compounds like nicotine, and are involved in modulating a wide array of physiological processes including cognition, muscle contraction, autonomic nervous system regulation, and pain perception. The complexity of nAChRs arises from their heteromeric assembly, composed of various combinations of subunits (α, β, γ, δ, and ε), which gives rise to multiple receptor subtypes with distinct pharmacological and functional properties. This structural diversity presents both opportunities and challenges in targeting these receptors for therapeutic intervention.(2)

Dysfunction or altered regulation of nAChRs has been implicated in numerous neurological and systemic disorders such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, schizophrenia, addiction, and chronic pain syndromes. Given their critical involvement in these conditions, nAChRs have emerged as promising drug targets. (3) While significan t attention has been paid to the development of agonists and positive modulators to enhance receptor function, the therapeutic potential of nicotinic receptor antagonists is increasingly recognized. Antagonists can be valuable in conditions where receptor overactivation contributes to pathology, such as in certain types of neuropathic pain or neurodegeneration.

There are obstacles to the discovery and development of effective antagonists of nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChR) in the realization of important selectivity for nAChR subtype, but also off-target actions, since non-subtype specific inhibition of nAChR can disrupt cholinergic transmission to cause undesired side effects(4). Tools in Medicinal Chemistry, Structural Biology and Molecular Pharmacology have begun to reveal complex receptor structure and binding to ligands, which is opening the doors of a more rational design of selectivity of pharmacology. In this review, we discuss the structural diversity of known and novel nicotinic receptor antagonists and the logic behind their designs in order to target receptor subtypes for a therapeutic need, and we will provide a roadmap for research that is needed to drive scientific inquiries to overcome gaps in knowledge(5). We hope to provide scientists from a chemistry, biology and clinical research perspective on ways to provide a strong foundation for the future to develop safe and effective nicotinic receptor antagonists that would have therapeutic potential.

2. Classification of Nicotinic Receptors

Nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) are pentameric ligand-gated ion channels consisting of five subunits from a family that includes α, β, γ, δ, and ε types. With their specific arrangement of these subunits providing the receptor with certain structural and functional characteristics 6) These subunits can arrange into two basic classes: homomeric (or complete) receptors that consist purely of five identical α subunits and heteromeric (or assemble) receptors that utilize a combination of α and β subunits in various arrangements. For instance, α7 receptor subtype, that is more common in the central nervous system (CNS), a homomeric receptor subtype that activates and desensitizes quickly, has various functions including cognition and neuroprotection. Heteromeric receptors, like the α4β2 subtype, portray a more complex pharmacological actions and unique profile across the CNS and are utilized in synaptic transmission and plasticity. (7)

The distribution and functions of nAChRs also inform their classification. In the CNS, neuronal nAChRs—including some subtypes like α4β2 and α7—contribute to the modulation of learning and memory, as well as processes that contribute to the signaling of pain. Peripheral nAChRs are mostly a muscle-type of nAChR found at neuromuscular junction and are composed of the subunits of α1, β1, γ, δ, and ε, which are involved in muscle contraction and movement. (8) From a pharmacological standpoint, nicotinic receptors can be classified into neuronal and muscular classes, which represent differences in subunit composition and physiology. Neuronal type receptors are predominantly heteromeric and mediate effects on neurotransmitter release and neuronal excitability, while muscle-type receptors mediate control of skeletal muscle activation. (9) This distinction is vital for drug development because it is possible to achieve therapeutic effects in neurological disorders while

reducing unwanted effects such as muscle weakness by selective targeting of specific nAChR subtypes.

Subunit composition and diversity (α, β, γ, δ, ε subunits).

Nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) are ion channels composed of five subunits organized in a pentamer configuration, which contributes to their functional and structural diversity. These subunits can be categorized in a family of homologous proteins as α (alpha), β (beta), γ (gamma), δ (delta), and ε (epsilon) where each subunit is characterized by different genes, and yet contribute functionally distinct properties to the receptor complex itself.(10) The receptor's ability to bind to acetylcholine or other agonists are centered in the α subunits since this is where the primary binding sites are present. In fact, there are several different isoforms of the α subunits (e.g., α1 - α10) which vary in their distribution in tissues and have different pharmacological properties. Similarly, the β subunits, which include β1 - β4 isoforms, are thought to modulate the properties of the receptor's ion channel, such as ion selectivity and gating kinetics. (11) The γ, δ, and ε subunits are primarily involved with the muscle-type nAChRs at the neuromuscular junction and are principally involved with the assembly and stabilization of the receptor and its function. Specifically, during development, the γ subunit is included in the receptor pentamer, but as muscle type nAChRs mature, the γ subunit is replaced with the ε subunit, which alters the kinetics and conductance properties of the nAChR. The δ subunit represents another essential element of muscle receptors and is important for receptor stability. Taken together and configured with the other subunits, they inspire a large array of receptor subtypes, each with unique physiological function and pharmacological sensitivity that collectively reflect the diversity of nicotinic receptor function across tissues and development. (12)

Homomeric vs. Heteromeric nAChRs

Nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) can be classified based on their subunit composition into homomeric and heteromeric receptors. Homomeric nAChRs consist entirely of five identical α subunits, which assemble to form functional ion channels. A well-known example is the α7 receptor subtype, which is abundantly expressed in the brain and exhibits fast activation and desensitization properties. (13)These receptors are typically involved in rapid signaling and have distinct pharmacological profiles due to their uniform subunit structure. In contrast, heteromeric nAChRs are made up of a combination of different α and β subunits. This diversity in subunit assembly allows for a wide variety of receptor subtypes with varied biophysical and pharmacological characteristics. For instance, the α4β2 receptor is a common heteromeric form found in neuronal tissues, known for its high affinity for nicotine and involvement in cognitive processes. (14) The heteromeric composition provides a greater functional complexity compared to homomeric receptors.

CNS vs. Peripheral Receptor Subtypes

Nicotinic receptors are distributed throughout both the central nervous system (CNS) and peripheral nervous system, but their subtypes vary depending on location and function. In the CNS, nicotinic receptors predominantly consist of neuronal subtypes such as α4β2 and α7, which regulate neurotransmitter release, synaptic plasticity, and cognitive functions like learning and memory. (15) These CNS subtypes are critical for modulating neural circuits and are implicated in various neurological diseases. On the other hand, peripheral nicotinic receptors are mainly found at the neuromuscular junction, where muscle-type receptors facilitate communication between motor neurons and skeletal muscles. These muscle-type receptors contain specific subunits such as α1, β1, γ, δ, and ε, which differ significantly from their neuronal counterparts. (16) Their primary role is to mediate muscle contraction, highlighting the functional specialization of nicotinic receptor subtypes according to their anatomical location.

Pharmacological Classification: Neuronal vs. Muscular Receptors

From a pharmacological perspective, nicotinic acetylcholine receptors are categorized into neuronal and muscular classes based on their subunit composition and physiological roles. Neuronal nAChRs are predominantly composed of various combinations of α and β subunits and are primarily located

in the brain and autonomic nervous system. (17) These receptors influence a wide range of neurological functions, including neurotransmitter release, attention, and pain perception. In contrast, muscular nAChRs, found at the neuromuscular junction, have a unique subunit assembly including α1, β1, γ, δ, and ε subunits. Their role is to transmit signals from motor neurons to muscle fibers, initiating muscle contraction. Due to their distinct locations and functions, drugs targeting neuronal nAChRs must be selective to avoid interfering with muscular receptors, as non-selective antagonism could lead to unwanted effects such as muscle weakness or paralysis. (18) Understanding this pharmacological distinction is essential for developing targeted therapies with minimal side effects.

3. Chemistry of Nicotinic Receptor Antagonists

The chemistry of nicotinic receptor antagonists stems from the ability for selective binding and inhibition of the activity of nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) to block receptor activation and subsequent signaling. Antagonists exhibit a vast array of structural diversity and belong to the following structural classifications, small molecules, peptides, and natural toxins. As the objective of many synthetic antagonists are to mimic the shape or charge distribution of acetylcholine, the compound ultimately does not conduct the activation function of acetylcholine; instead, the molecule plays the role of a competitive ligand to the ligand-binding site. (19) Structurally, antagonists often contain at least one positively charged nitrogen atom that can interact with negatively charged regions present within the binding domain of the receptor; this structural region is important for high-affinity binding. Some antagonists act as competitive antagonists, meaning that they inhibit receptor function by opening the binding site for acetylcholine or other agonists, while other types of antagonists play a role as non-competitive antagonists by binding allosterically and inducing changes in the receptor conformation that inhibit channel opening.(20) Natural toxins, such as α-bungarotoxin or conotoxins from marine snail and snake venom, have provided useful molecular templates, due to their high specificity and potency to certain nAChR subtypes. Advances in structural biology provided important information about the binding pockets of the receptor and served as a basis for rationally designing new antagonists with selectivity for specific receptor subtypes and less off-target effects. In addition, modifying the molecular scaffolds of these toxins aims to improve their pharmacokinetic properties including, but not limited to, solubility, metabolic stability, blood-brain barrier penetration, and other properties that make them attractive therapeutic candidates for neurological disorders and/or muscle disease.

Structural features of known antagonists (competitive, noncompetitive, channel blockers, allosteric inhibitors).

Nicotinic receptor antagonists display many structural characteristics that correlate with their respective modes of inhibition. (21) Competitive antagonist drugs largely are similar in chemical structure to acetylcholine or nicotine, which allows them to directly bind to the receptor's active site and inhibit agonist binding. These compounds typically have one or more positively charged nitrogen groups that are important for being able to bind to the receptor's ligand-binding site. (22) Noncompetitive antagonists are molecules that bind to different receptor sites—often allosteric sites—that change the conformation of the receptor from potentially active states and inhibit receptor activation, but do not directly compete with acetylcholine binding. Channel blockers are a unique subtype of non-competitive antagonists and directly block the ion channel pore to prevent ion flow, irrespective of whether a ligand is bound to the receptor or substrate. (23) Allosteric inhibitors modify the activity of nicotinic receptors by binding away from the primary agonist-binding pocket, often by stabilizing inactive receptor states and impacting the kinetics of gating of the receptor. This variation of antagonists' structures allows for fine-tuning of pharmacology to modulate nAChR function, especially for therapeutic targeting across nAChR subtypes.

Examples: d-tubocurarine, mecamylamine, hexamethonium, α-conotoxins, bupropion, varenicline derivatives.

Several well-defined compounds illustrate a range of nicotinic receptor antagonists, with a few exceptions. d-Tubocurarine is a natural alkaloid derived from plants that is a competitive antagonist

at muscle-type receptors and was historically a muscle relaxant to reduce muscle tone during surgery. Mecamylamine is a synthetic noncompetitive antagonist that penetrates the blood-brain barrier and antagonizes neuronal nicotinic ACh receptors and is useful in basic research as well as treatment of several disorders including hypertension. (24) Hexamethonium is another synthetic antagonist that acts at autonomic ganglia and antagonizes transmission by physically occluding the ion channel. Peptide toxins, such as α-conotoxins from marine cone snails, are highly subtype selective in their antagonism and can be potent, particularly at neuronal receptors. Bupropion and varenicline derivatives are also clinically used as small molecule antagonists or partial agonists for smoking cessation for specific neuronal receptor subtypes to alleviate nicotine dependence. (25) Each example illustrates the chemical diversity of nicotinic antagonists and potentially multiple mechanisms of action.

Natural products vs. synthetic compounds.

Nicotinic receptor antagonists are typically categorized either as natural products or synthetic products, each of which have important advantages for drug discovery and development. Natural antagonists, which include both alkaloids and peptide toxins, usually show high specificity and affinity for nAChRs in part due to естественно evolve evolutionary pressures selecting for nAChR-directed nAChRs - e.g., d-tubocurarine and α-conotoxins. The complex structures of these natural antagonists can present limitations to synthesis and/or modification efforts as well as limit bioavailability. (26) On the other hand, synthetic antagonists offer advantages in that they allow for further chemical modification and optimization of pharmacokinetic and pharmacodynamic properties. For instance, the structures of large synthetic nicotinic receptor antagonists such as mecamylamine, or hexamethonium analogs can be modified to improve receptor selectivity, metabolic stability, and/or tissue penetrance. (27) Rather than try to select an approach, with recent advancements in organic chemistry, often the best initial approaches are to utilize natural products or combinations of natural products with synthetic chemistry or other advancements that promote synthesis. Ultimately, considerations of biological natural products approach and synthetic approaches can allow for an overall increased therapeutic view.

Structure–activity relationship (SAR) studies.

Research in structure–activity relationship (SAR) studies is essential to ascertain how the chemical structure of nicotinic receptor antagonists varies by effect on potency, selectivity, and efficacy. SAR studies use deliberate alteration of molecular characteristics including ring size, functional groups, charge distribution, and stereochemistry to determine which aspects of chemical structure are necessary for receptor binding and antagonistic activity. (28) Activity relationship (SAR) studies have shown, for example, that positively charged nitrogen atoms are necessary for binding at the receptor's binding site, and that hydrophobic substituents can serve to improve membrane permeability and affinity of the antagonist for receptor binding. SAR studies also assist with delineating competitive vs non-competitive mechanisms by providing evidence of altered receptor conformation or changes in ion channel gating associated with variations in chemical structure. (29) The knowledge derived from SAR approaches can direct chemists toward rational antagonists with therapeutic profiles predicated on reduced side effects and target specificity.

Role of lipophilicity, ionization, and stereochemistry.

The pharmacological action of nicotinic antagonists is highly dependent on lipophilicity, ionization state, and stereochemical considerations. Lipophilicity influences the ability of a compound to cross biological membranes (i.e., blood-brain barrier), an essential feature for promoting central nervous system receptor activity. (30) Compounds with moderate lipophilicity have better bioavailability and accessibility to the receptor. Ionization, particularly the presence of circulating nitrogen groups, modifies binding affinity, since these positively charged groups interact electrostatically with complementary sites in the receptor ligand binding domain. The degree of ionization may also relate to compound solubility and distribution after a compound has penetrated the blood-brain barrier. Changes to ionization can enhance binding or reduce solubility of inhaled compounds, depending on

the specific interaction with the target receptor. Stereochemistry, or the three-dimensional configuration of the individual atoms, dictates the extent to which an antagonist will fit into the binding pocket of the receptor, because many targets have stereo-selectivity as a feature. (31) An enantiomer of a given chemical structure will typically have a distinctly different affinity and/or activity from the other enantiomer. Jointly, these chemical properties delineate potency, selectivity, and therapeutic potential of the antagonist.

4. Mechanism of Action

The mechanism of action of drugs that antagonize acetylcholine (ACh) can be understood through a detailed exploration of several pharmacological principles: competitive antagonism, noncompetitive antagonism, voltage dependence, and receptor subtype selectivity. (32) These mechanisms determine how a drug interferes with cholinergic transmission, how reversible the effect is, and what clinical effects can be expected based on where and how the drug acts.

Firstly, competitive antagonism occurs when a drug binds directly to the same site on the receptor as ACh—the orthosteric binding site—without activating the receptor. These drugs usually resemble the structure of ACh enough to fit into the binding pocket, but they lack the ability to initiate the receptor's conformational change required for downstream signaling. By occupying this site, competitive antagonists prevent ACh from binding and activating the receptor. However, because the binding is reversible, the inhibitory effect is surmountable—meaning that if the concentration of ACh is increased (for example, by administering a cholinesterase inhibitor), it can displace the antagonist from the receptor and restore receptor function (33) This type of mechanism is typical of non-depolarizing neuromuscular blocking agents such as tubocurarine, vecuronium, and pancuronium, which block the nicotinic ACh receptors (nAChRs) at the neuromuscular junction, leading to muscle paralysis used during surgery or mechanical ventilation.

In contrast, noncompetitive antagonism involves drug binding at a site that is distinct from the ACh binding site, such as an allosteric site or within the ion channel pore of the receptor. These drugs alter the structure or function of the receptor in a way that prevents ACh from activating it, regardless of how much ACh is present. (34) As a result, their effect is insurmountable, meaning that increasing ACh levels does not reverse the blockade. Some noncompetitive antagonists act by locking the receptor in an inactive state or physically occluding the ion channel, thereby disrupting the flow of ions (e.g., sodium and potassium) that is necessary for depolarization and signal transmission. This form of antagonism is more common with certain CNS-acting drugs or in high-dose neuromuscular blockers, where channel-blocking properties may contribute to prolonged paralysis. (35) Noncompetitive antagonists can be particularly useful when a more sustained or irreversible form of inhibition is needed.

The distinction between voltage-dependent and non-voltage-dependent blockade further refines our understanding of drug action. Voltage-dependent blockers require the receptor's ion channel to be in an open or active state to bind effectively. Their action depends on the membrane potential and is often referred to as use-dependent or state-dependent blockade. In practice, this means that these drugs are more effective when the neuron or muscle is more active, as repetitive stimulation opens more ion channels, increasing drug access. (36) For example, certain local anesthetics and anticonvulsants act in this manner, although they do not act on cholinergic receptors. Some neuromuscular blockers may exhibit this behavior at high doses. In contrast, non-voltage-dependent blockers act independently of membrane potential or channel state—they can bind to closed or inactive receptors and exert their effects without requiring receptor activation. (37) This type of blockade is more consistent across varying physiological conditions and is typical of many competitive antagonists like pancuronium and muscarinic antagonists such as atropine.

Another critical aspect of cholinergic pharmacology is receptor subtype selectivity, which plays a major role in determining both the therapeutic application and side effect profile of a drug. Acetylcholine acts on two broad classes of receptors: nicotinic (nAChRs) and muscarinic (mAChRs). (38) Each of these classes contains multiple subtypes with distinct locations and functions. For instance, nicotinic receptors are subdivided into Nm (muscle-type) receptors, found at the neuromuscular junction, and Nn (neuronal-type) receptors, found in autonomic ganglia and certain

CNS regions. Muscarinic receptors, which are G-protein-coupled receptors, include subtypes M1 through M5. (39) Each subtype has a distinct tissue distribution and physiological role. M1 receptors are primarily found in the CNS and gastric parietal cells, M2 receptors are predominantly located in the heart where they reduce heart rate, and M3 receptors are found in smooth muscle and glandular tissue where they mediate contraction and secretion.

Understanding and exploiting this receptor subtype specificity is essential in drug development to maximize therapeutic benefit while minimizing adverse effects. For example, M3-selective antagonists such as tiotropium are used in the treatment of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma because they relax bronchial smooth muscle without significantly affecting M2 receptors in the heart, thus avoiding unwanted cardiac effects. Similarly, Nm-selective nicotinic antagonists such as rocuronium are used during surgery to achieve skeletal muscle relaxation without interfering with Nn receptors in the autonomic nervous system, which would otherwise cause widespread autonomic disturbances like hypotension or tachycardia. (40) On the other hand, drugs that lack selectivity may interact with multiple receptor subtypes, leading to broader—but often less desirable—effects.

5. Therapeutic Applications

The therapeutic applications of drugs targeting acetylcholine receptors, particularly nicotinic and muscarinic subtypes, span a broad range of clinical conditions, from anesthesia and cardiovascular disorders to neurological diseases and emerging roles in oncology. Each therapeutic area utilizes the unique mechanisms of cholinergic modulation, depending on receptor subtype, location, and the nature of the pathological process being targeted.

One of the most established uses of cholinergic antagonists is in the field of anesthesia, where neuromuscular blocking agents (NMBAs) are essential. These drugs, such as rocuronium, vecuronium, and pancuronium, act as competitive antagonists at nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) located at the neuromuscular junction. (41)By preventing ACh from binding to these receptors on skeletal muscle, NMBAs induce reversible paralysis, facilitating endotracheal intubation, mechanical ventilation, and surgical procedures by eliminating voluntary and reflex muscle movement. These agents are carefully dosed and monitored, with reversal agents like neostigmine or sugammadex used postoperatively to restore neuromuscular function.

Historically, ganglionic blockers were used in the treatment of hypertension. These drugs, such as hexamethonium and mecamylamine, act by blocking neuronal-type nicotinic receptors (Nn) located in the autonomic ganglia. By inhibiting synaptic transmission in both sympathetic and parasympathetic ganglia, these agents produced a global autonomic blockade, resulting in lowered blood pressure. (42) However, due to their non-selective action and a wide range of adverse effects—such as orthostatic hypotension, constipation, urinary retention, and blurred vision—these drugs have fallen out of favor and have been replaced by more selective antihypertensive medications. Today, ganglionic blockers are primarily of historical and research interest.

In the realm of neuropsychiatric disorders, cholinergic systems—especially nicotinic receptors—are increasingly recognized for their role in modulating mood, attention, and cognition. Abnormalities in cholinergic signaling have been implicated in conditions like depression, schizophrenia, and nicotine addiction. For instance, alterations in α7 and α4β2 nicotinic receptor subtypes have been observed in schizophrenia, where deficits in sensory gating and attention are linked to reduced cholinergic tone. Some investigational drugs aim to enhance nicotinic receptor activity to improve cognitive symptoms. In nicotine addiction, partial agonists like varenicline act on nicotinic receptors to reduce cravings and withdrawal symptoms by providing moderate receptor stimulation while blocking the effects of nicotine from tobacco.

Neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease (AD) and Parkinson's disease (PD), are also characterized by dysfunction in cholinergic pathways. In AD, there is a significant loss of cholinergic neurons in the basal forebrain, leading to cognitive deficits. The mainstay of symptomatic treatment involves acetylcholinesterase inhibitors (e.g., donepezil, rivastigmine) which increase synaptic ACh levels and thereby enhance cholinergic transmission. In PD, although primarily a dopaminergic disorder, cholinergic pathways are also disrupted. (43) Antimuscarinic agents, such as

trihexyphenidyl, are used to manage tremor and rigidity, especially in younger patients, by reducing the relative cholinergic overactivity resulting from dopamine deficiency in the striatum. However, their use is limited in the elderly due to cognitive side effects.

In pain management, the cholinergic system—particularly muscarinic receptors—plays a role in modulating nociceptive pathways in both the spinal cord and brain. Activation of certain muscarinic subtypes, especially M2 and M4, has been shown in preclinical models to produce analgesic effects, possibly through the inhibition of excitatory neurotransmitter release or enhancement of descending inhibitory pathways. (44) Some studies have also explored nicotinic receptor agonists, like those targeting α4β2 subtypes, for their ability to attenuate neuropathic and inflammatory pain. However, clinical development has been challenging due to issues with selectivity and adverse effects such as nausea and dizziness.

Emerging evidence also suggests a potential role of nicotinic acetylcholine receptors in oncology. Several studies have identified overexpression or abnormal activation of nAChRs, particularly the α7 and α9 subtypes, in various tumors, including lung, breast, colon, and pancreatic cancers. (45) These receptors appear to promote tumor growth, survival, angiogenesis, and metastasis by activating intracellular signaling pathways such as PI3K/Akt, MAPK, and JAK/STAT. Nicotine and its derivatives—present in tobacco—can bind to these receptors and stimulate cancer progression, even independent of their addictive effects. Consequently, there is growing interest in developing nAChR antagonists or modulators as potential anticancer therapies, either as monotherapy or in combination with existing treatments. However, clinical translation remains in the early stages, and further research is needed to fully elucidate therapeutic targets within this system.

6. Current Challenges

The development and clinical use of drugs targeting acetylcholine receptors—both nicotinic and muscarinic—are associated with several ongoing challenges that limit their safety, efficacy, and broader therapeutic application. (46) These challenges arise from both the complexity of the cholinergic system and the pharmacological limitations of current drugs. Understanding these issues is essential for improving existing therapies and developing next-generation compounds with better clinical profiles.

One of the most significant challenges is the lack of selectivity across receptor subtypes. Both nicotinic and muscarinic receptors exist in multiple subtypes (e.g., M1–M5 for muscarinic; α and β combinations for nicotinic receptors), each distributed differently across tissues and with distinct physiological roles. Many currently available drugs interact with multiple subtypes simultaneously, leading to non-specific effects. (47) For example, a drug targeting the M3 receptor to relieve bronchoconstriction in asthma might also affect M2 receptors in the heart, leading to bradycardia. Similarly, nicotinic receptor modulators designed to affect brain function may also influence neuromuscular transmission or autonomic ganglia. This lack of receptor subtype discrimination often results in off-target actions and limits the ability to achieve therapeutic effects without adverse consequences.

Another critical limitation lies in the difficulty of achieving effective penetration across the blood–brain barrier (BBB). The BBB is a highly selective permeability barrier that protects the central nervous system (CNS) from potentially harmful substances in the blood but also prevents many therapeutic agents from reaching their targets in the brain. Cholinergic drugs aimed at treating CNS disorders like Alzheimer's disease, schizophrenia, or chronic pain must be sufficiently lipophilic or possess specific transport mechanisms to cross the BBB. However, increasing lipophilicity to improve CNS penetration can inadvertently increase systemic side effects, as the drug may also affect peripheral tissues. (48) Conversely, poor BBB penetration results in low drug concentrations in the brain, rendering the therapy ineffective for neurological conditions.

Adverse effects represent a third major challenge and are often a direct consequence of non-selective receptor targeting. Since acetylcholine plays a role in numerous physiological processes, cholinergic drugs frequently cause side effects in unintended systems. For instance, muscarinic antagonists used to treat Parkinsonian tremors may impair cognitive function by inhibiting M1 receptors in the cortex. (50) Similarly, nicotinic receptor modulators can induce muscle weakness if they interfere with

neuromuscular transmission, or cause cardiovascular effects such as changes in heart rate and blood pressure due to their impact on autonomic ganglia. These adverse effects not only limit the maximum tolerated dose of the drug but also negatively affect patient compliance and quality of life, especially in chronic conditions.

A further complication is the development of tolerance and dependence with chronic use. Prolonged stimulation or inhibition of cholinergic receptors can lead to adaptive changes, such as receptor desensitization, internalization, or upregulation. For example, in the case of nicotine, chronic exposure leads to tolerance, where higher doses are needed to achieve the same effect, and physical dependence, characterized by withdrawal symptoms when the drug is stopped. This phenomenon is not limited to nicotine; similar challenges may arise with experimental nicotinic receptor agonists developed for cognitive enhancement or pain relief. Tolerance reduces the long-term efficacy of the drug, and dependence introduces concerns about abuse potential and patient safety during withdrawal or dose tapering.

Finally, there is the persistent issue of limited clinical translation from preclinical studies. While many cholinergic drugs show promising results in animal models, their effectiveness often fails to carry over into human trials. (51) This discrepancy arises from several factors, including species differences in receptor expression, variability in drug metabolism, and differences in disease progression between animals and humans. Additionally, the complex and redundant nature of the human cholinergic system may allow compensatory mechanisms to undermine the therapeutic effects observed in controlled laboratory settings. (52) This gap between preclinical efficacy and clinical success remains a major barrier in the development of new cholinergic therapeutics.

Table: Nicotinic Receptor Antagonists

Antagonist Name	Receptor Subtype Targeted	Mechanism of Action	Therapeutic Use	Key Features/Notes
Curare (D-tubocurarine)	Muscle-type nAChRs (Nm)	Competitive antagonist at acetylcholine binding site	Neuromuscular blockade in anesthesia	Classic non-depolarizing neuromuscular blocker
Mecamylamine	Ganglionic nAChRs (NN)	Noncompetitive antagonist at ion channel	Hypertension (historical), smoking cessation aid (off-label)	Crosses blood-brain barrier, affects CNS
α-Conotoxins	Various nAChR subtypes	Competitive antagonists derived from cone snail toxins	Research tool, potential pain therapeutics	High subtype selectivity, peptide-based
Hexamethonium	Ganglionic nAChRs	Noncompetitive antagonist	Historically used in hypertension	Limited CNS penetration, replaced by better agents
Vecuronium	Muscle-type nAChRs (Nm)	Competitive antagonist	Neuromuscular blockade in surgery	Intermediate duration, fewer side effects
Atracurium	Muscle-type nAChRs (Nm)	Competitive antagonist	Neuromuscular blockade in anesthesia	Undergoes Hofmann elimination, useful in renal impairment
Methyllycaconitine (MLA)	α7 nAChR subtype	Competitive antagonist	Experimental use	Selective for α7 subtype, used in research

7. Recent Advances in Drug Discovery

In recent years, drug discovery targeting acetylcholine receptors—both nicotinic and muscarinic—has benefited greatly from scientific and technological advancements. Researchers are increasingly focused on developing safer, more selective, and more effective antagonists by leveraging cutting-edge methodologies across pharmacology, computational modeling, and biotechnology. (53) These innovations have opened new avenues for addressing the challenges associated with receptor subtype selectivity, drug side effects, and the complexity of cholinergic signaling in various diseases.

One of the major advancements in this area is the use of high-throughput screening (HTS) techniques to identify novel antagonists of acetylcholine receptors. HTS enables researchers to test thousands to millions of chemical compounds rapidly against specific receptor targets in a laboratory setting. By

automating the screening process and integrating it with cell-based or biochemical assays, HTS allows for the rapid identification of molecules that show promising binding or inhibitory activity against muscarinic or nicotinic receptors. (54) This approach not only accelerates the discovery pipeline but also helps uncover previously unknown chemical structures that may serve as starting points for drug development. Through HTS, diverse chemical libraries—including synthetic molecules and natural products—can be screened for functional activity, significantly increasing the likelihood of finding compounds with desirable pharmacological properties.

Alongside experimental methods, computational approaches have emerged as powerful tools in drug discovery. Techniques such as molecular docking, quantitative structure-activity relationship (QSAR) modeling, and molecular dynamics (MD) simulations are widely used to predict how potential drug candidates will interact with acetylcholine receptors at the molecular level. Molecular docking helps simulate the binding orientation and affinity of ligands within the receptor's active or allosteric sites. QSAR models use statistical and machine learning algorithms to correlate molecular features with biological activity, enabling the design of new compounds with optimized properties. (55) MD simulations, on the other hand, provide insights into the dynamic behavior of receptor-ligand complexes over time, helping predict stability, conformational changes, and binding kinetics. These computational techniques significantly reduce time and cost in early-stage drug development by guiding the selection and optimization of promising candidates before laboratory synthesis and testing.

Another innovative direction in cholinergic drug discovery involves novel molecular scaffolds derived from natural toxins, particularly α-conotoxins from marine cone snails and snake venom neurotoxins. These peptides naturally target nicotinic receptors with high affinity and specificity, making them valuable templates for drug development. α-Conotoxins, for example, are known to block specific nAChR subtypes involved in pain pathways, offering potential for non-opioid analgesics. (56) Their precise receptor targeting also makes them useful tools in dissecting receptor subtype function. Researchers are now modifying these natural peptides to improve stability, reduce immunogenicity, and enhance selectivity, transforming them into potential therapeutic agents for conditions ranging from chronic pain to neurodegenerative diseases.

Equally important is the development of subtype-selective antagonists, which has become a major focus to overcome the adverse effects associated with non-selective cholinergic drugs. Advances in medicinal chemistry, combined with better structural knowledge of receptor subtypes, have enabled the design of molecules that target specific receptor isoforms—such as M1- or M3-selective muscarinic antagonists or α7-selective nicotinic antagonists. Subtype-selective agents offer the advantage of targeting disease-relevant receptors while minimizing unwanted interactions with others, thereby reducing side effects and improving therapeutic outcomes(57) For instance, selective M3 antagonists are used to treat overactive bladder without affecting heart rate, which would involve M2 receptors. Similarly, α7 nicotinic antagonists are being investigated for modulating inflammation and cognitive dysfunction in neuropsychiatric conditions.

Finally, the field is expanding beyond small molecules to include biologics, such as monoclonal antibodies and engineered peptides, which represent a new frontier in targeting cholinergic systems. These biologics can be designed to bind with high specificity to particular receptor subtypes or to neutralize pathological ligands that affect cholinergic signaling. Monoclonal antibodies may also serve as long-acting therapeutics, with fewer dosing requirements compared to small molecules. Engineered peptides derived from natural ligands or toxins can be modified for enhanced pharmacokinetics, targeted delivery, and BBB penetration. Though still in experimental stages, these biologic approaches hold promise for treating complex diseases like autoimmune encephalitis involving nAChRs, certain cancers, and chronic inflammatory conditions, where conventional small molecules may fall short.

8. Research Roadmap

The future of drug development targeting acetylcholine receptors—especially nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs)—requires a more strategic and technologically advanced research roadmap. Given the complexity and widespread role of cholinergic signaling in both the central and peripheral

nervous systems, the next phase of discovery must focus on improving precision, safety, and clinical relevance of therapeutics. Each direction in this roadmap addresses a current limitation and offers a pathway to more effective interventions for neurological, psychiatric, and systemic diseases.

A critical first step is the utilization of structural-based drug design, driven by increasingly available high-resolution crystallographic and cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-EM) data for nAChRs and related receptors. These structural insights reveal the exact three-dimensional arrangement of receptor subunits, binding pockets, and conformational changes upon ligand interaction. This information is invaluable for rational drug design, enabling researchers to craft molecules that fit precisely within specific receptor subtypes or allosteric sites. By moving away from trial-and-error screening and toward structure-guided development, drug candidates can be designed with higher binding affinity, subtype specificity, and improved pharmacokinetic profiles. As cryo-EM continues to uncover the structural dynamics of receptors in different functional states, this method will serve as the foundation for next-generation cholinergic modulators.

Equally important is a strong focus on receptor subtype selectivity, which is essential for reducing adverse effects and achieving therapeutic specificity. Both muscarinic and nicotinic receptors exist in multiple subtypes, each mediating distinct physiological functions. Non-selective antagonists often disrupt normal processes in non-target tissues, leading to unwanted effects like dry mouth, bradycardia, muscle weakness, or cognitive impairment. Developing drugs that target only the disease-relevant receptor subtypes—such as M1 or M3 in CNS and respiratory conditions, or α7 in inflammation and neurodegeneration—can significantly enhance treatment outcomes while minimizing systemic toxicity. The roadmap should prioritize medicinal chemistry and pharmacophore modeling focused specifically on these subtypes to optimize both efficacy and safety.

Another promising direction is the exploration of allosteric modulators as potentially safer and more flexible alternatives to orthosteric antagonists. Unlike traditional drugs that compete directly with acetylcholine at the active site, allosteric modulators bind to alternative sites on the receptor, modifying receptor activity without completely blocking it. This allows for fine-tuning of receptor function, maintaining physiological balance while correcting dysregulation. Allosteric modulators can also provide greater subtype selectivity, given that allosteric sites are often less conserved across receptor families. Furthermore, these modulators can reduce the risk of receptor desensitization and tolerance, making them more suitable for chronic treatment regimens. Investing in the identification and validation of allosteric sites through both computational modeling and functional assays should be a key objective in upcoming research initiatives.

In parallel, the integration of systems pharmacology and network biology approaches offers a more holistic view of drug action. Traditional drug development often focuses on single targets in isolation, but many diseases, especially neuropsychiatric and neurodegenerative disorders, involve complex biological networks. By using systems-level analysis, researchers can understand how cholinergic drugs affect entire pathways, feedback loops, and interactions with other neurotransmitter systems. This can uncover indirect therapeutic targets, anticipate off-target effects, and optimize multi-target drug design. Network biology can also identify patient subgroups most likely to benefit from specific cholinergic interventions, supporting the shift toward personalized medicine. Incorporating systems-based methodologies early in drug development can improve decision-making and reduce attrition rates in clinical trials.

Bridging the gap between animal models and human outcomes remains one of the most pressing challenges in translational neuroscience. Many cholinergic drugs show promise in preclinical models but fail in clinical trials due to species differences in receptor expression, brain structure, and disease progression. Therefore, the roadmap must emphasize translational studies that validate drug effects in human-relevant systems, such as humanized animal models, induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs), and organoids. Functional imaging, electrophysiological studies, and biomarker development in both animals and early-phase human trials can help establish predictive correlations, ensuring that preclinical efficacy aligns more closely with clinical outcomes. This approach can streamline drug development timelines and improve the success rate of new therapeutics reaching the market.

Lastly, the future of cholinergic therapy may lie in combination treatments that target multiple neurotransmitter systems simultaneously. Diseases like Alzheimer's, schizophrenia, depression, and chronic pain involve dysregulation across several neural pathways, including dopaminergic, glutamatergic, and GABAergic systems in addition to cholinergic dysfunction. Combining cholinergic antagonists or modulators with agents acting on other systems can enhance therapeutic efficacy, reduce required dosages, and potentially mitigate side effects. For instance, combining a nicotinic receptor modulator with an NMDA receptor antagonist could address both cognitive and excitotoxic components of neurodegeneration. Strategic use of multi-target approaches, informed by systems biology and clinical data, should be a central component of the research roadmap going forward.

9. Future Perspectives

The future perspectives of targeting nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) in drug development are increasingly shaped by innovations in personalized medicine, artificial intelligence, multifunctional pharmacology, nanotechnology, and long-term goals for precision therapeutics. These emerging approaches aim to overcome the limitations of traditional drug design by addressing inter-individual variability, enhancing drug specificity, improving delivery to target sites, and expanding the therapeutic potential of nAChR modulators across various diseases.

A promising avenue lies in the application of personalized medicine, particularly through the identification and understanding of genetic polymorphisms in nAChR subunit genes. Variations in genes encoding receptor subtypes—such as CHRNA5, CHRNA7, or CHRNB2—can significantly affect receptor expression, function, and drug responsiveness. For instance, certain polymorphisms in the CHRNA5 gene have been linked to nicotine dependence and altered responses to smoking cessation therapies. By integrating pharmacogenomic data into clinical decision-making, therapies can be tailored to individual genetic profiles, enhancing both efficacy and safety. Personalized approaches also enable better risk prediction for adverse drug reactions and support the development of biomarker-driven treatment strategies, particularly in conditions like schizophrenia, Alzheimer's disease, or nicotine addiction, where genetic contributions to cholinergic signaling are increasingly recognized.

Simultaneously, artificial intelligence (AI) is revolutionizing drug discovery through its ability to process vast datasets and identify patterns that would be impossible to discern manually. AI-driven platforms can integrate information from molecular docking, structure-activity relationships, clinical databases, and patient genomics to design and optimize candidate molecules for nAChR targets. Machine learning algorithms can predict binding affinities, selectivity, toxicity, and pharmacokinetics, significantly accelerating the drug development timeline. Moreover, AI can facilitate virtual screening of millions of compounds, prioritize leads for synthesis and testing, and model receptor-ligand interactions at a level of precision unattainable through traditional methods. As AI continues to evolve, its role in predictive modeling and dynamic simulations will be critical for developing highly selective and functionally relevant nAChR antagonists.

Another forward-looking strategy is the development of multifunctional ligands, which combine antagonistic activity with additional therapeutic properties, such as neuroprotection, anti-inflammatory effects, or antioxidant action. These hybrid molecules can address the multifactorial nature of diseases like Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, and chronic pain, where cholinergic dysfunction is often accompanied by neuronal injury and inflammation. For example, an nAChR antagonist that also inhibits oxidative stress pathways could not only modulate neurotransmission but also prevent further neurodegeneration. Multifunctional ligands reduce the need for polypharmacy, potentially lowering the risk of drug-drug interactions and improving patient adherence. The design of such compounds requires a careful balance of pharmacodynamic and pharmacokinetic properties, but holds significant promise for treating complex CNS disorders with fewer side effects.

Equally important is the growing role of nanotechnology in enhancing CNS-targeted drug delivery. One of the longstanding challenges in treating brain disorders is the restrictive nature of the blood–brain barrier (BBB), which limits the access of most therapeutic compounds to neural tissue. Nanocarriers—such as liposomes, polymeric nanoparticles, dendrimers, and lipid-based vesicles—

can be engineered to encapsulate nAChR antagonists, protect them from enzymatic degradation, and facilitate their transport across the BBB via receptor-mediated or passive diffusion mechanisms. Additionally, surface modification of nanoparticles with ligands that target brain-specific receptors can further improve site-specific delivery, thereby enhancing therapeutic concentrations in diseased areas while reducing peripheral exposure. This approach is particularly relevant for diseases like glioblastoma, multiple sclerosis, and neurodegenerative disorders, where targeted modulation of cholinergic signaling could offer clinical benefits.

Looking further ahead, the long-term vision for nAChR-targeted therapy centers on the development of safer, highly selective, and disease-specific antagonists. Future compounds will need to avoid broad suppression of cholinergic activity and instead exert precise modulation based on disease context. For example, in schizophrenia or nicotine addiction, targeting specific subtypes like α4β2 or α7 nAChRs could restore normal signaling without disrupting cognitive or motor function. Advances in structural biology, genomics, and receptor mapping will enable the fine-tuning of pharmacological profiles to achieve this level of selectivity. Furthermore, long-term research will likely focus on disease-modifying agents rather than symptomatic treatments, aiming to alter the course of neurological and psychiatric diseases by correcting underlying cholinergic dysfunction. The integration of interdisciplinary research—from molecular neuroscience and medicinal chemistry to computational biology and clinical pharmacology—will be essential to realizing this future.

In summary, the future of nAChR-targeted drug development is moving toward precision, integration, and innovation. Personalized therapy based on genetic profiles, AI-driven discovery platforms, multifunctional drug design, nanotechnology-enabled delivery, and long-term goals of disease-specific modulation collectively form a comprehensive roadmap. These advances promise not only to overcome current therapeutic limitations but also to transform the treatment landscape for a wide range of conditions involving cholinergic dysfunction.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, targeting nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) continues to present significant therapeutic potential across a diverse range of conditions—including neurological disorders, psychiatric illnesses, neurodegeneration, chronic pain, and even oncology. Their involvement in fundamental processes such as cognition, motor control, synaptic plasticity, and autonomic regulation makes them highly attractive drug targets. However, despite decades of research, clinical progress has been limited by key challenges such as lack of receptor subtype selectivity, unwanted systemic side effects, poor brain bioavailability, and incomplete translation from animal studies to human outcomes. While several compounds have shown promise in preclinical or early clinical trials, few have achieved long-term success due to safety concerns, loss of efficacy over time, or complex disease mechanisms that extend beyond cholinergic dysfunction. Therefore, the journey from molecular target to effective therapy remains complex and requires strategic, multifaceted approaches.

At the heart of overcoming these obstacles lies the importance of chemistry-driven innovation. Advances in medicinal chemistry, structural biology, and computational design are critical for engineering next-generation compounds with greater precision, fewer side effects, and longer-lasting activity. The development of allosteric modulators, subtype-specific ligands, and multifunctional molecules relies heavily on a deep understanding of chemical structure-activity relationships and receptor binding dynamics. Furthermore, innovative drug delivery platforms—enabled by breakthroughs in nanotechnology and bioengineering—can enhance therapeutic targeting, especially within the central nervous system. Chemistry not only defines the molecular identity of potential therapeutics but also determines their pharmacological behavior, metabolic stability, and clinical viability. Thus, the continuous evolution of drug chemistry remains central to unlocking the full clinical potential of nAChR antagonists.

To truly advance the field, there is an urgent need for interdisciplinary collaboration that bridges gaps between pharmacology, medicinal chemistry, and neuroscience. Pharmacologists bring insight into receptor dynamics and drug-receptor interactions; chemists provide the tools to design, modify, and optimize molecules; and neuroscientists help contextualize receptor function within complex brain

networks and disease models. Integration of these disciplines fosters a holistic view of drug development, from molecular mechanisms to behavioral outcomes. Additionally, contributions from fields such as computational biology, genetics, and systems pharmacology are becoming increasingly vital in designing personalized and network-level interventions. Encouraging collaborative research environments, cross-disciplinary training, and data-sharing initiatives will be key to accelerating progress and translating scientific discoveries into meaningful therapies for patients suffering from cholinergic-related disorders.

Overall, the future of nAChR-targeted therapeutics depends not only on overcoming current limitations but on redefining how we approach drug discovery and development. By embracing innovation, fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, and maintaining a patient-centered perspective, the field can move closer to delivering safer, more effective, and precisely targeted treatments for a wide range of complex diseases.

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