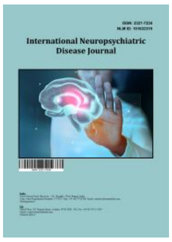

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Neuroscientific Approaches to Understanding Adolescent Susceptibility to Substance Abuse

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Review Article

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a pivotal developmental stage characterised by significant neurobiological changes that heighten susceptibility to substance abuse. This period is marked by the maturation of the brain regions responsible for decision-making and impulse control, alongside an increased sensitivity to

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rewards driven by dopaminergic pathways. This review aimed to understand adolescent susceptibility to substance abuse using a neuroscientific approach. In line with best practices, data were collected from a variety reliable source to ensure a comprehensive view of the topic. Research studies on adolescent neurodevelopment have contributed to a broader understanding of the physiological and psychological factors at play during adolescence, while grey literature, including expert interviews and focused group discussions, has offered practical insights from frontline professionals, such as psychologists, social workers, and healthcare providers, who deal directly with adolescent substance use. These results demonstrate that the relationship between genetic factors and environmental conditions, such as stress and trauma, intensifies this vulnerability, thereby heightening the likelihood of individuals participating in risky behaviours. This review examines the neuroscientific foundations of substance use during adolescence, highlighting the critical role of timely interventions that utilize neuroplasticity to enhance resilience and reduce risk. By integrating cognitive training and behavioural therapies into public health initiatives, adolescents' cognitive control mechanisms and their propensity for substance abuse can be reduced.

Keywords: Adolescence; dopamine; neuroplasticity; substance abuse; vulnerability.

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is universally acknowledged as a critical period of human development, characterized by profound changes in structure. These transformations are fundamental for cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, and social behaviours that shape the trajectory of individuals into adulthood. During this time, the brain undergoes rapid yet uneven developmental changes, particularly within regions that govern higher-order processes such as decision-making, impulse control, and risk assessment. Despite its role in fostering the transition to mature independence, adolescence is also marked by heightened susceptibility to risky behaviours, including substance abuse and the emergence of mental health disorders [1]. This period represents a unique intersection between biological, psychological, and social influences, all converging to create vulnerabilities often not seen in childhood or adulthood.

Across the globe, adolescent substance abuse has emerged as a significant public health concern, with rising trends seen in various regions. While the specifics of these trends vary across cultural and geographical contexts, the problem is not limited to one nation or demographic. In many parts of Europe, mainly Eastern Europe, adolescent alcohol consumption has reached troubling levels, while regions in Africa and Asia have witnessed an increase in the use of illicit drugs such as cannabis and methamphetamines. The convergence of these substances with mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and conduct disorders, has compounded the risks associated with adolescence [2]. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, alongside reports from the World Health Organization, has consistently highlighted the widespread nature of this issue, calling attention to the long-term consequences of adolescent substance abuse on both individuals and societies [3,4].

In response to these trends, there has been a marked shift towards neuroscientific research aimed at uncovering the brain-based mechanisms that underpin adolescent susceptibility to substance abuse. While many public health strategies focus on social and environmental factors such as peer pressure, family dynamics, and socioeconomic status, these approaches often neglect the underlying neurobiological mechanisms that significantly contribute to adolescent risk behaviours.

Thus, this manuscript explored the neuroscientific underpinnings of adolescent susceptibility to substance abuse, focusing on key neurodevelopmental processes such as the maturation of the prefrontal cortex, the heightened sensitivity of the brain’s reward systems, and the role of neuroplasticity in shaping both resilience and vulnerability to substance use.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research, designed as a qualitative systematic review, adopted a Thematic Analysis approach, considered one of the most versatile and rigorous qualitative research methods [5]. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns, or themes, within a data set to interpret the key phenomena under investigation. In this study, the approach was specifically tailored to explore the neuroscientific underpinnings of adolescent substance use, an area of increasing concern due to the vulnerability of the adolescent brain to external influences, including substance abuse [6]. In line with best practices in qualitative systematic reviews, data were collected from various reliable sources, ensuring a comprehensive view of the topic. Peer-reviewed journals provided the scientific foundation, offering evidence-based research into neurobiological changes and adolescent substance use. Books on adolescent neurodevelopment contributed to a broader understanding of the physiological and psychological factors at play during adolescence, while grey literature—including expert interviews and focused group discussions—offered practical insights from frontline professionals, such as psychologists, social workers, and healthcare providers, who deal directly with adolescent substance use. This combination of data sources ensured both depth and breadth in understanding the issue, highlighting the complexity of factors influencing adolescent substance abuse. NVivo is recognized for its utility in managing, analysing, and visualizing qualitative data, allowing for more precise identification of themes [7]. The coding process involved tagging segments of the data with relevant codes, each representing an aspect of the research question. Hence, themes related to key constructs such as neurobiological changes, decision-making, impulse control, and environmental influences on substance use were identified. Subsequently, the emergent themes were continuously refined and mapped against existing neuroscientific research to ensure alignment with established knowledge in the field. The interplay between genetic predispositions and environmental stressors, for instance, was highlighted as a key contributing factor to adolescent substance use, corroborating findings from studies on gene-environment interactions in adolescent behaviour [8]. Moreover, the analysis illuminated how dopaminergic pathways, responsible for reward processing, play a pivotal role in the heightened sensitivity to rewards during adolescence, making adolescents more prone to substance use as a means of seeking pleasure or alleviating stress [9]. The use of thematic analysis in this study also allowed for an exploration of how interventions, particularly those leveraging neuroplasticity, can be tailored to support adolescents in managing impulsive behaviours and avoiding substance abuse. Integrating cognitive training and behavioural therapies into public health initiatives can enhance the adolescent brain's cognitive control mechanisms, promoting resilience [10].

3. RESULTS

3.1 The Reward System, Risk-Taking Behaviour, and Substance Abuse

Central to understanding adolescent susceptibility to substance abuse is the role of the brain's reward system, primarily governed by dopaminergic pathways. Dopamine, a neurotransmitter responsible for regulating pleasure, motivation, and reward, plays a crucial role in shaping the behaviour of individuals, particularly during adolescence [11]. As the brain undergoes significant development during this period, dopamine's influence on reward sensitivity intensifies, leading adolescents to seek out activities and experiences that provide immediate gratification. This heightened sensitivity to dopamine is one of the key factors driving risky behaviours, including substance use.

Adolescence is marked by a spike in dopamine receptor density particularly in brain regions associated with reward processing, such as the nucleus accumbens. This increase in dopamine activity makes teenagers more responsive to rewards, creating a neurobiological predisposition toward pleasure-seeking behaviours. Substances like alcohol, nicotine, and illicit drugs artificially elevate dopamine levels, reinforcing substance use as an intensely rewarding experience [12]. Akunna et al. (2024) observed similar patterns in university populations, where heightened dopamine responses to substance use were compounded by academic and social pressures, leading to entrenched substance use behaviours. These findings indicate that the neurobiological vulnerabilities seen in adolescence often persist into later stages of life, making early intervention critical [13]. In contrast, adults typically show more regulated dopamine responses, as their reward systems have matured alongside the prefrontal cortex, which governs executive function and self-control. Consequently, adults are better equipped to evaluate long-term consequences and resist impulses toward immediate but risky rewards. Adolescents, however, are more vulnerable to impulsive behaviours due to the ongoing development of the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for higher-order decision-making. This delayed maturation, coupled with heightened sensitivity to rewards, increases the likelihood of risky behaviours like substance use. Once these behaviour's begin, adolescents are less capable of curbing them due to underdeveloped cognitive control systems [14].

The dual-systems model offers a useful framework for understanding adolescent behaviour, emphasizing the interaction between two neural systems: the reward system and the cognitive control system. During adolescence, the reward system, which includes structures like the limbic system and nucleus accumbens (NAcc), is highly active, driving reward-seeking behaviours. Meanwhile, the prefrontal cortex lags in development, impairing impulse control and foresight. This imbalance between heightened reward sensitivity and delayed cognitive control increases the propensity of adolescents to prioritize short-term rewards over long-term consequences, making them more prone to behaviours like substance use [15].

Substance use during adolescence alters the natural trajectory of brain maturation by interfering with key processes such as myelination and synaptic pruning. Myelination, the process by which neurons become more efficient at transmitting signals, is essential for cognitive functioning and continues well into early adulthood. Substance abuse disrupts this process, leading to slower cognitive development and impaired decision-making abilities. In addition to disrupting myelination, substances also interfere with synaptic plasticity, the brain's ability to strengthen or weaken neural connections based on experience [16]. During adolescence, synaptic plasticity is especially robust, allowing the brain to adapt to new learning experiences. However, the introduction of drugs or alcohol can interfere with this plasticity, effectively rewiring the brain in ways that reinforce addictive behaviours and reduce cognitive flexibility.

3.2 Vulnerability and Resilience: Genetic and Environmental Factors

Adolescence is time of heightened neurological sensitivity and a period shaped by the complex interaction between genetic predispositions and environmental influences. While neurological development plays a significant role in explaining adolescent susceptibility to substance abuse, it is essential to recognize that genetic and environmental factors further modulate these vulnerabilities. Specifically, genetic composition, can predispose some individuals to a higher risk of developing substance use disorders, while environmental factors such as family dynamics, peer influence, and socio-economic conditions can either amplify or mitigate these risks [13]. One of the most researched genetic components associated with substance use vulnerability involves the dopamine D2 receptor gene (DRD2). Variants of this gene have been linked to differences in how individuals process rewards, with specific alleles conferring a heightened sensitivity to substances that stimulate dopamine release, such as alcohol, nicotine, and illicit drugs [17]. Adolescents carrying these variants may experience a more intense reward response to substance use, making them more prone to seeking out these pleasurable experiences despite potential risks. Another significant gene implicated in substance use susceptibility is the catechol-O-methyltransferase (COMT) gene, which plays a key role in the prefrontal cortex's dopamine metabolism. Variations in the COMT gene can affect the efficiency of dopamine regulation, influencing impulsivity, cognitive flexibility, and stress response—factors critical in adolescent decision-making. Adolescents with less efficient COMT variants may struggle with impulse control, making them more susceptible to engaging in risky behaviours such as substance use [18].

However, the presence of genetic predispositions alone is not deterministic. The development of substance use disorders in adolescence often depends on the interaction between genetic vulnerabilities and environmental influences. This is where the concept of gene-environment interaction becomes particularly important. One notable environmental factor that plays a critical role in adolescent substance use vulnerability is stress. Adolescents who experience chronic stress, whether due to familial conflict, academic pressure, or social isolation, are more likely to engage in substance use as a form of self-medication. Stress activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, releases cortisol in response to stress. Prolonged activation of the HPA axis can deregulate the brain's reward system, increasing the likelihood that an adolescent will turn to substances to alleviate feelings of anxiety or distress. Moreover, exposure to stress can exacerbate the effects of genetic predispositions, particularly those related to reward sensitivity and impulsivity, creating a synergistic effect that amplifies the risk of substance abuse [19].

In addition to stress, trauma during childhood or adolescence has been shown to increase the likelihood to substance use disorders significantly. Trauma, particularly in the form of physical or emotional abuse, neglect, or exposure to violence, can have profound effects on brain development, leading to changes in how the brain processes emotions, rewards, and threats. Adolescents who have experienced trauma often show increased activity in the amygdala, the brain's emotional processing centre, and decreased activity in the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for regulating emotional responses and impulses [20]. These neurodevelopmental changes create a heightened sensitivity to emotional distress, making substances that alleviate negative emotions such as alcohol, cannabis, or opioids particularly appealing. The experience of trauma also increases the likelihood of co-morbid mental health conditions, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), both of which are strongly associated with higher rates of substance use in adolescence.

At the molecular level, environmental factors exert their influence on brain development and behaviour through epigenetic modifications. Epigenetics refers to the changes in gene expression that occur without altering the underlying DNA sequence, often in response to environmental stimuli. For instance, chronic stress or trauma can trigger epigenetic changes that affect the expression of genes related to the brain's reward system, particularly those involved in dopamine regulation. These changes can enhance an individual's sensitivity to substances, increasing the likelihood of developing addictive behaviours [21]. Conversely, positive environmental experiences such as strong social support or engagement in rewarding, healthy activities can lead to epigenetic modifications that promote resilience, strengthening the brain's ability to regulate emotions and impulses.

3.3 Interventions and Preventative Strategies

Neuroscience has revealed that adolescence is marked by immense neuroplasticity, making it an optimal time for interventions that can modify the brain's trajectory in a positive direction. The key finding takesaway from this research is the importance of timing. Interventions must be introduced before or during the critical window of heightened risk-taking behaviour, typically between the ages of 12 and 18 [22,23]. By intervening during this phase of rapid brain development, it is possible to enhance the cognitive control systems (particularly the prefrontal cortex) that help regulate impulsive behaviours and resist the allure of substances that activate the brain's reward circuits.

Cognitive training is one such intervention that leverages neuroplasticity to improve executive functioning. Programs designed to enhance working memory, impulse control, and decision-making can help adolescents develop the cognitive tools necessary to navigate social pressures and resist substance use. These interventions are particularly effective when integrated into school-based programs, where adolescents can consistently practice and refine these skills in real-life scenarios [24]. In addition to cognitive training, behavioral therapies that focus on emotion regulation and stress management are critical, especially for adolescents who have experienced trauma or chronic stress. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), for example, teaches individuals how to identify and alter negative thought patterns and behavior, providing adolescents with the coping mechanisms needed to handle stress without resorting to substance use [25]. These therapies are not only effective at addressing the psychological factors that contribute to substance use but also engage the brain's neuroplasticity by reinforcing healthier behavioral pathways.

Neuroscientific advancements also point to emerging neurofeedback and non-invasive brain stimulation techniques as promising interventions. Neurofeedback involves monitoring brain activity (often through EEG) and training individuals to regulate their neural responses. This technique has been shown to enhance self-control and reduce impulsivity, making it a promising approach for adolescents at risk of substance abuse. Similarly, transcranial magnetic stimulation (TMS), a non-invasive technique that uses magnetic fields to stimulate specific areas of the brain, has shown potential in modulating activity in the prefrontal cortex, the region responsible for impulse control. These methods, while still in the early stages of application for substance abuse, offer exciting possibilities for directly altering brain function to reduce vulnerability during adolescence [26,27].

Pharmacological approaches, although more commonly associated with treatment rather than prevention, are another area where neuroscience offers critical insights. Medications that target the brain's reward system such as those that modulate dopamine or glutamate activity may be used to reduce cravings or mitigate the rewarding effects of substances in adolescents who have already initiated substance use [25]. However, caution is required with pharmacological interventions, particularly in younger populations, given the potential for side effects and the impact on the still-developing brain.

3.4 Public Health Implications

The insights gleaned from neuroscience must not remain confined to academic research but should inform public health policy and the design of large-scale prevention programs. School-based interventions are an ideal setting for translating neuroscientific findings into practical applications. These programs should be structured to reflect the realities of adolescent brain development, emphasizing not only the risks associated with substance use but also equipping students with the tools to strengthen executive function, manage stress, and resist peer pressure [28]. For instance, incorporating cognitive training exercises into regular school curricula could serve as a preventive measure to enhance decision-making and self-control, potentially reducing the likelihood of substance abuse.

Furthermore, public health policies must consider the individual variability in adolescent susceptibility to substance use. Neuroscientific research has shown that adolescents differ in their genetic predispositions, environmental exposures, and neurodevelopmental trajectories, meaning that a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be effective. Targeted interventions that consider an individual's neurological, genetic, and environmental risk factors are essential for addressing substance use vulnerability in a personalized and nuanced manner [29]. For example, adolescents with a history of trauma may benefit more from trauma-informed care and emotion regulation strategies, while those with genetic predispositions may require closer monitoring and early interventions to counteract these risks.

Policymakers should also prioritize investment in early intervention programs that begin before adolescents reach the peak period of risk-taking behavior. By introducing interventions in middle school or even earlier, it is possible to intervene before substance use behavior become entrenched. These programs should focus on promoting healthy brain development by addressing both the biological and environmental factors that contribute to substance use risk. Additionally, public health initiatives must work to reduce the environmental risk factors, such as poverty and social instability, that exacerbate adolescent vulnerability, ensuring that preventive strategies reach those most in need.

4. CONCLUSION

The intersection between adolescent brain development and substance abuse vulnerability offers a complex but crucial area for research and intervention. Neuroscientific findings accentuate the elaborate relationship between the maturation of the brain's reward systems, cognitive control mechanisms, and the external factors that shape an adolescent's environment. The heightened sensitivity to rewards, coupled with delayed maturation of the prefrontal cortex, creates a fertile ground for risky behaviors during adolescence, making this developmental period one of heightened susceptibility to substance use. Looking forward, it is clear that further research is needed to deepen the understanding of adolescent susceptibility to substance abuse. Longitudinal studies are particularly important for tracking how early brain development influences substance use trajectories into adulthood. Additionally, there is a pressing need to investigate the role of sex differences in adolescent brain development and substance use vulnerability. Emerging evidence suggests that male and female brains may respond differently to reward stimuli and substance use, yet much of the existing research has focused predominantly on male subjects. Understanding these differences is vital for developing gender-sensitive interventions.

Finally, there is a need for diverse population studies that consider how socio-economic, cultural, and racial factors influence both brain development and substance use behavior. The majority of neuroscience research has been conducted in high-income countries, often with limited representation of minority groups. Expanding research to include more diverse populations will ensure that interventions are effective across different socio-economic and cultural contexts.

DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

Author(s) hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc) and text-to-image generators have been used during writing or editing of this manuscript.

CONSENT AND ETHICAL APPROVAL

It is not applicable.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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