# Neurobiology of dementia

**A Abyad**

**Correspondence**
A. Abyad, MD, MPH, MBA, DBA, AGSF , AFCHSE
Consultant, Internal Medicine and Geriatric, Dar Al Shifa Hospital, Kuwait Chairman, Middle-East Academy for Medicine of Aging.
President, Middle East & North Africa Association on Aging & Alzheimer's
Coordinator, Middle-East Primary Care Research Network
Coordinator, Middle-East Network on Aging
**Email:** aabyad@cyberia.net.lb

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## Abstract

Dementia encompasses a group of progressive neurodegenerative disorders marked by cognitive, behavioural, and functional decline, underpinned by complex neurobiological processes. This chapter outlines the anatomical, cellular, and molecular mechanisms that drive disease onset and progression. Structural vulnerability of the hippocampus, cerebral cortex, white matter, and cognitive networks underlies characteristic clinical manifestations. At the microscopic level, neuro-inflammation, mitochondrial dysfunction, oxidative stress, excitotoxicity, impaired protein clearance, and synaptic loss converge to promote neuronal injury. Distinct proteinopathies—including amyloid-β plaques and tau tangles in Alzheimer's disease, α-synuclein inclusions in Lewy body dementia, and TDP-43 or tau aggregates in frontotemporal lobar degeneration—define specific dementia subtypes, yet share overlapping cascades of pathology. Vascular contributions, such as ischemia, hypoperfusion, and blood–brain barrier disruption, further compound neuronal vulnerability, highlighting the prevalence of mixed dementias. Collectively, these mechanisms illustrate dementia as a multifactorial disorder of network disintegration and cellular stress. Advancing insights into these processes are driving the development of biomarkers and disease-modifying therapies, paving the way for more precise, personalized approaches to diagnosis and care.

## Introduction

Dementia represents a constellation of progressive neurodegenerative disorders characterized by cognitive, behavioural, and functional decline. While clinical syndromes often overlap, advances in neurobiology have elucidated diverse yet interconnected molecular, cellular, and anatomical mechanisms driving disease onset and progression. A unified understanding of dementia's neurobiology is crucial for refining diagnostic accuracy, developing biomarkers, and targeting novel therapeutic interventions.

The symptoms of dementia vary from person to person and may include memory problems or mood changes or difficulty walking, speaking or finding their way. While dementia may include memory loss, memory loss by itself does not mean that a person has dementia. While some mild changes in cognition are considered a part of the normal aging process, dementia is not.

This chapter delves into the fundamental aspects of brain anatomy, cellular and molecular pathophysiology, and specific proteinopathies that characterize various forms of dementia.

## Brain Anatomy

The human brain, a marvel of biological engineering, orchestrates all our thoughts, emotions, and actions. Its intricate structure comprises various specialized regions, each contributing to specific cognitive functions and behaviour [1]. Dementia typically involves damage to these regions and their interconnected networks.

• **Cerebral Cortex:** The outermost layer of the brain, is responsible for higher-level functions such as memory, language, perception, and executive functions. Different lobes (frontal, parietal, temporal, occipital) contribute distinctively to these processes. Damage here often manifests as prominent cognitive deficits.

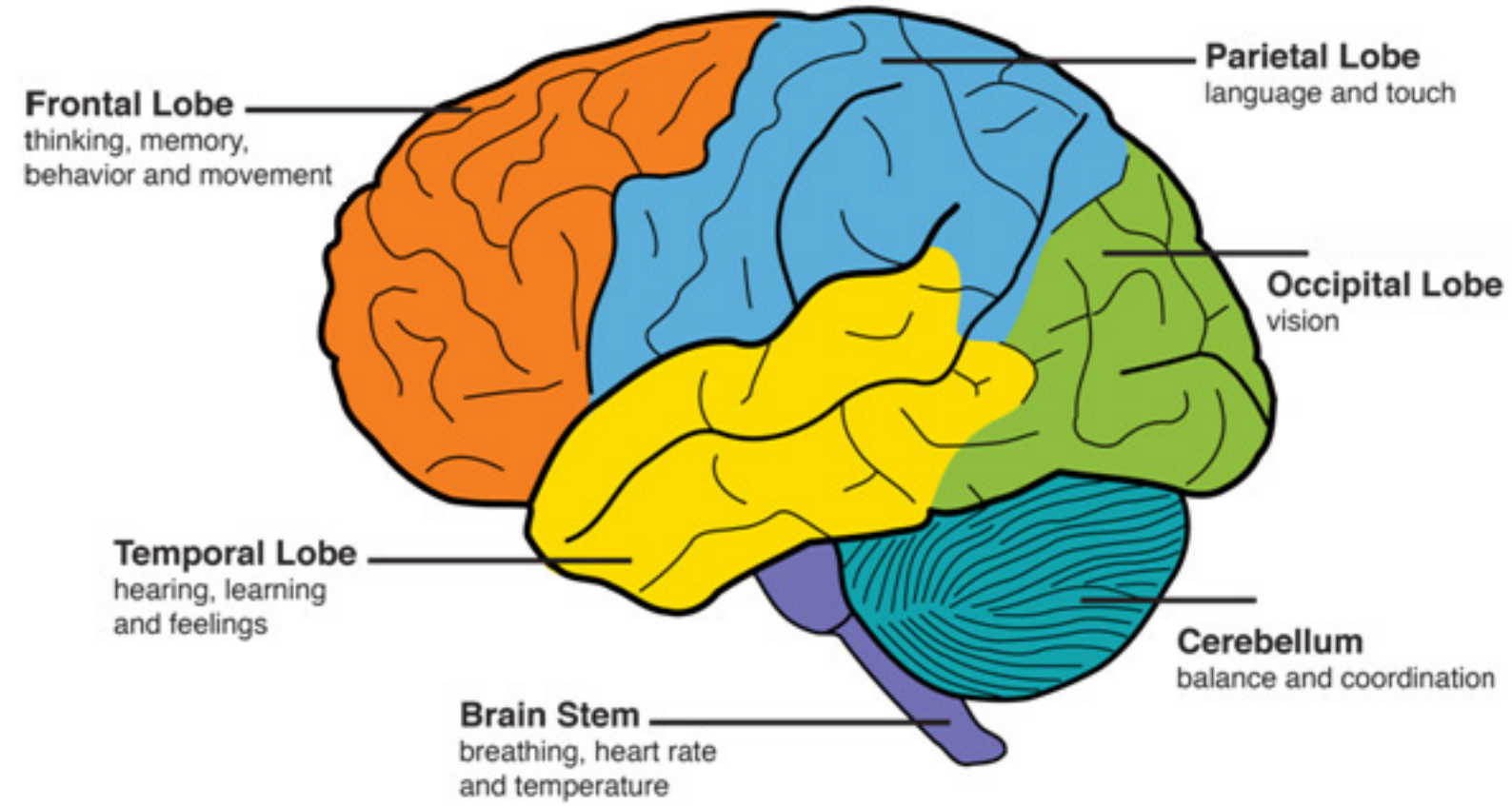


***Figure 2.1: A detailed diagram of the human brain***

• **Hippocampus:** Located within the temporal lobe, this seahorse-shaped structure is critical for the formation of new memories (episodic and spatial). Its degeneration is a hallmark of Alzheimer's disease, leading to classic memory impairment.

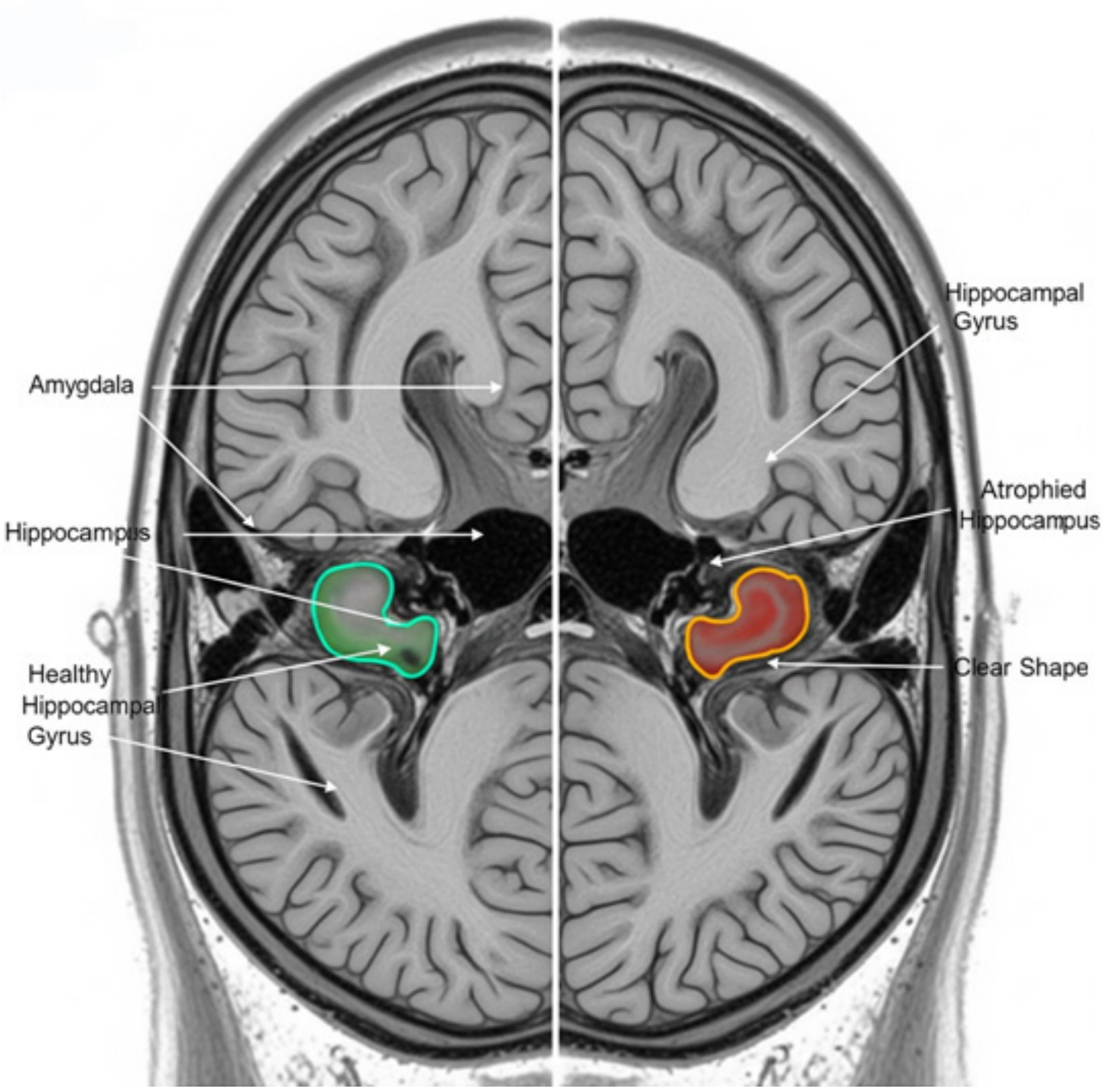


***Figure 2.2: An anatomical illustration or an MRI slice clearly showing the location of the hippocampus within the temporal lobe, perhaps comparing a healthy hippocampus to an atrophied one.***

• Basal Ganglia: **A group of subcortical nuclei involved in motor control, learning, and executive functions. Dysregulation** here can contribute to motor symptoms seen in some dementias, such as Parkinson's disease dementia and Lewy Body Dementia.

• **Thalamus:** A relay station for sensory and motor information, also playing a role in consciousness and alertness.

• **White Matter:** Composed of myelinated axons, forming communication pathways between different brain regions. Damage to white matter, often seen in vascular dementia, disrupts these vital connections, leading to widespread cognitive decline.

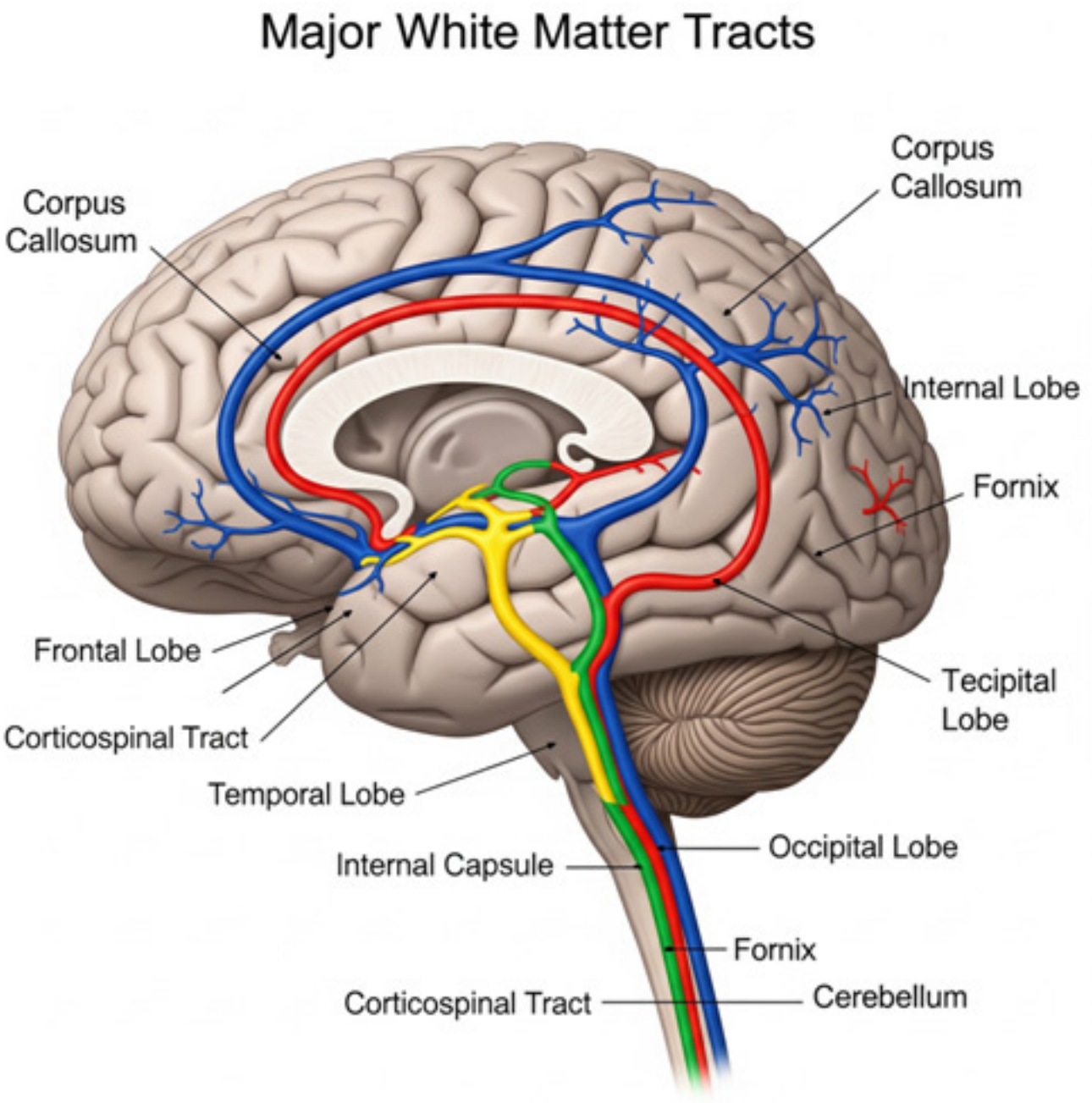


***Figure 2.3: A diagram illustrating major white matter tracts (e.g., corpus callosum, internal capsule) and how they connect different brain regions.***

**The Key areas affected in dementia are shown in Table 1:**

***Table 1: Brain Regions and Their Roles in Dementia***

| Brain Region | Primary Function | Impact in Dementia |
|---|---|---|
| **Hippocampus** | Memory formation and consolidation | Early atrophy in Alzheimer's disease (AD), leading to episodic memory loss [2]. |
| **Cerebral Cortex** | Higher cognitive functions (language, decision-making) | Degeneration causes aphasia, apraxia, and executive dysfunction [3]. |
| **Basal Forebrain** | Cholinergic neurotransmission | Loss of acetylcholine-producing neurons contributes to memory deficits [4]. |
| **Frontal & Temporal Lobes** | Behaviour, personality, language | Atrophy in frontotemporal dementia (FTD) leads to disinhibition and speech deficits [5]. |
| **Thalamus** | Sensory and motor signal relay | Disrupted connectivity contributes to cognitive slowing in vascular dementia (VaD) [6]. |
| **Striatum** | Motor control and reward processing | Lewy body accumulation in LBD leads to parkinsonism and cognitive fluctuations [7]. |

**Cognitive Networks**

Cognitive processes rely on distributed brain networks rather than isolated regions. Neurodegeneration disrupts these networks, leading to specific clinical syndromes.

The default mode network (involved in self-referential thought and memory retrieval), the salience network (detecting important stimuli), and the central executive network (working memory and problem-solving) are particularly vulnerable in dementia, leading to characteristic cognitive profiles. Disruption of these networks underpins the disconnection syndrome often observed.

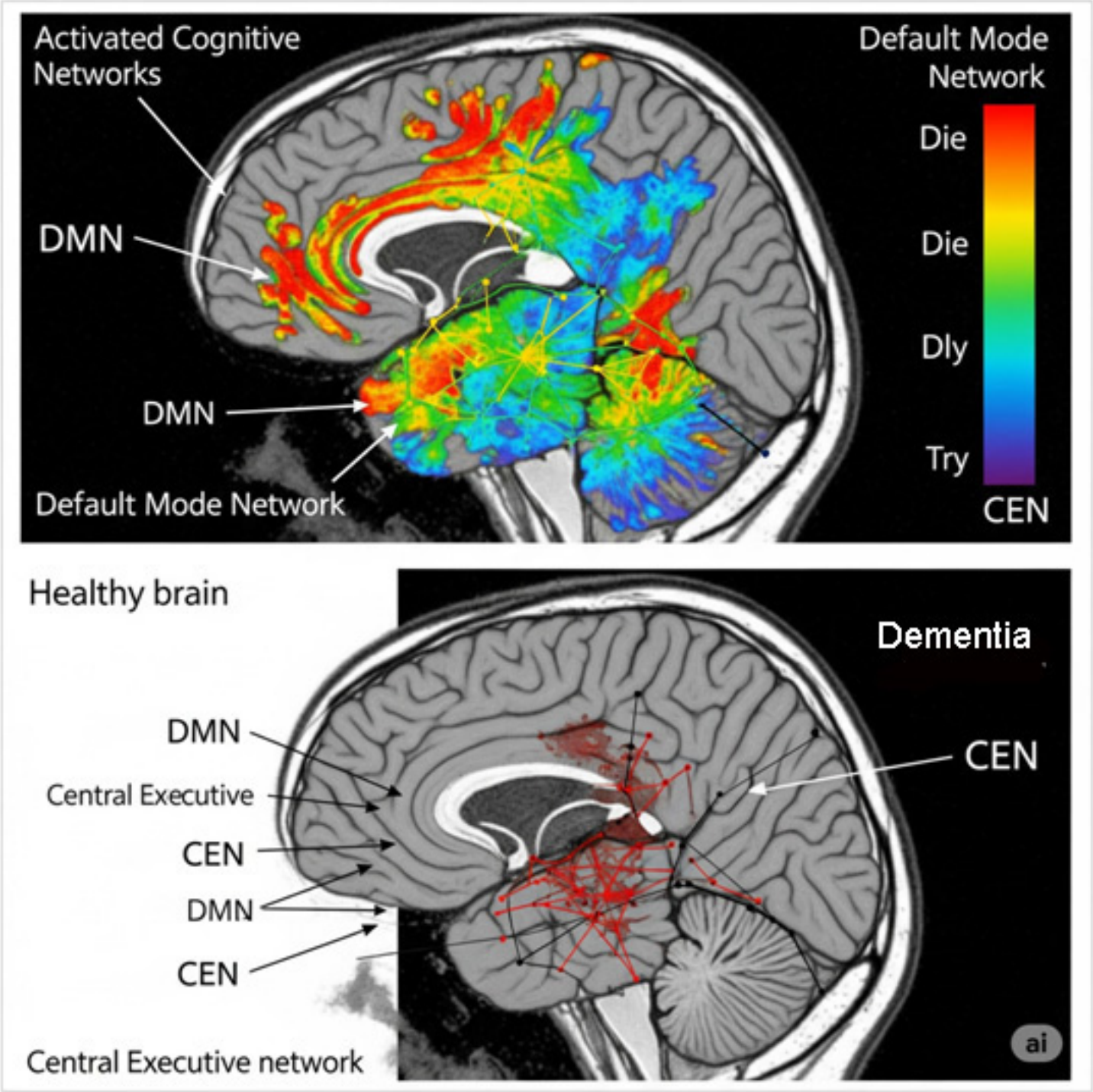


***Figure 2.4: A functional MRI (fMRI) image depicting activated cognitive networks (e.g., default mode network, central executive network) and how their connectivity might be impaired in dementia.***

**Default Mode Network (DMN)**
• Includes medial prefrontal cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, precuneus, and lateral parietal regions [8].
• Active during internally focused processes such as memory retrieval, future planning and self-referential thought.
• In Alzheimer's disease (AD), DMN regions show early amyloid deposition and hypometabolism on FDG-PET, correlating with episodic memory impairment [9,10].
**Salience Network**
• Anchored in anterior insula and anterior cingulate cortex [11].
• Detects and integrates emotionally or biologically significant stimuli.
• Dysregulated in behavioural variant frontotemporal dementia (bvFTD), contributing to impaired social cognition and emotional blunting [11].
***Executive Control Network***
• Frontal and parietal regions coordinate goal-directed behaviours, working memory, and problem-solving [12].
• Vulnerable in vascular cognitive impairment and subtypes of FTD.

Neuroimaging studies reveal network-specific disruptions that precede overt atrophy, offering potential early diagnostic biomarkers [13].

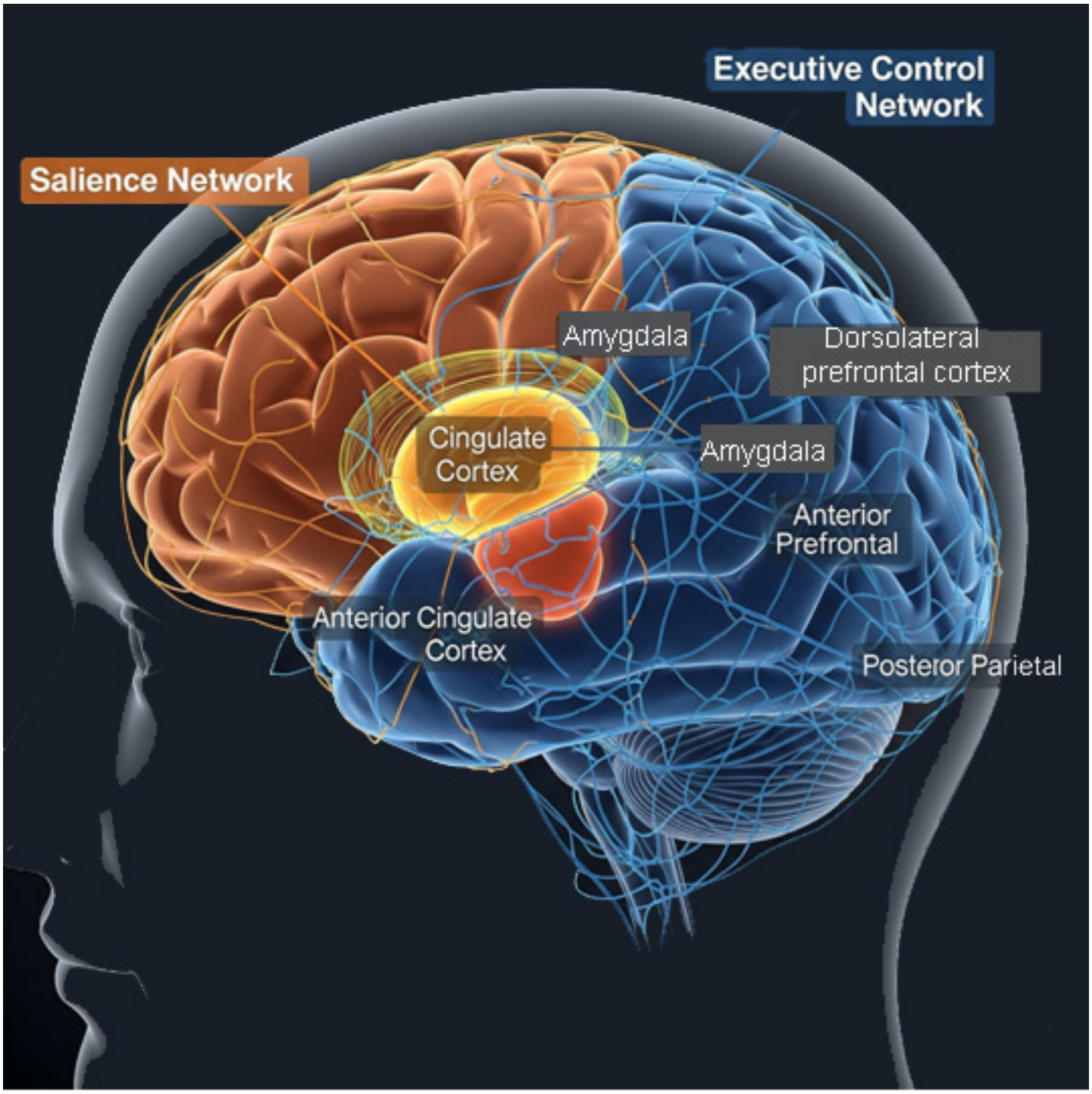


***Figure 2.5: Salience and Executive control networks.***

**Cellular and Molecular Pathophysiology**
At the microscopic level, dementia is characterized by a cascade of cellular and molecular events that ultimately lead to neuronal dysfunction and death. Neurodegeneration in dementia arises from multiple interacting pathways [14]:

**Neuroinflammation**
• Chronic activation of microglia and astrocytes leads to sustained production of pro-inflammatory cytokines (IL-1β, TNF-α, IL-6) [15].
• In AD, amyloid plaques act as persistent immune stimuli, perpetuating neuroinflammatory cascades.
• Neuroinflammation is increasingly recognized as a driver, rather than mere consequence, of neurodegeneration [16].

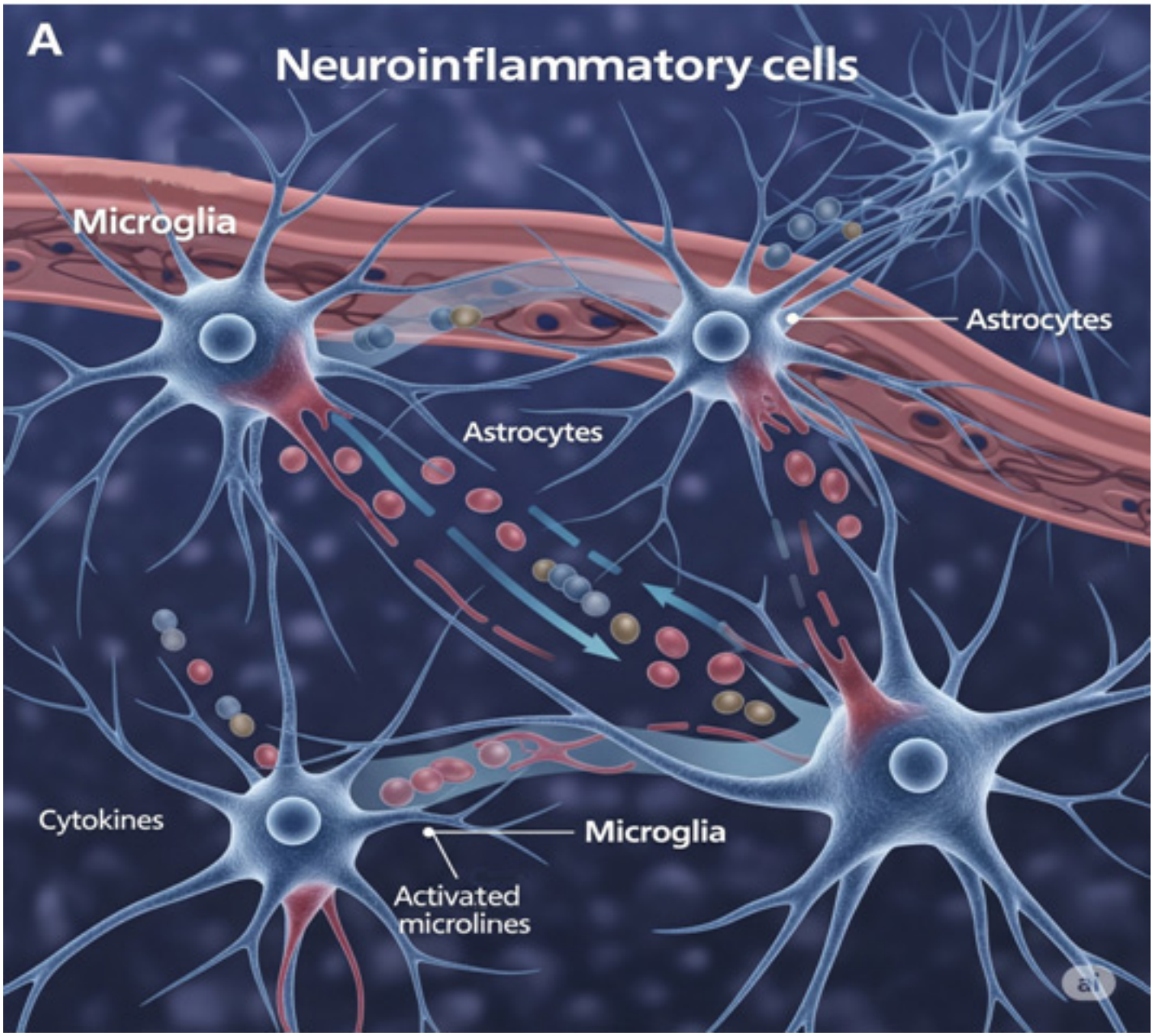


***Figure 2.6: An illustration showing activated microglia and astrocytes (neuroinflammatory cells) in neural tissue, depicting their interaction with neurons and the release of inflammatory mediators.***

**Mitochondrial Dysfunction**

Mitochondria, the powerhouses of the cell, are vital for neuronal energy production. Impaired mitochondrial function leads to energy deficits, increased oxidative stress, and ultimately, neuronal vulnerability and death. This is a common theme across various neurodegenerative diseases.

**Oxidative Stress**

• An imbalance between the production of reactive oxygen species (free radicals) and the body's ability to detoxify them.
• Mitochondrial dysfunction in neurons leads to excess reactive oxygen species (ROS) production.
• ROS damage DNA, proteins, and lipid membranes, accelerating synaptic failure and cell death [17].
• Biomarkers like 8-hydroxy-2′-deoxyguanosine (8-OHdG) are elevated in neurodegenerative diseases, reflecting oxidative DNA damage [18].

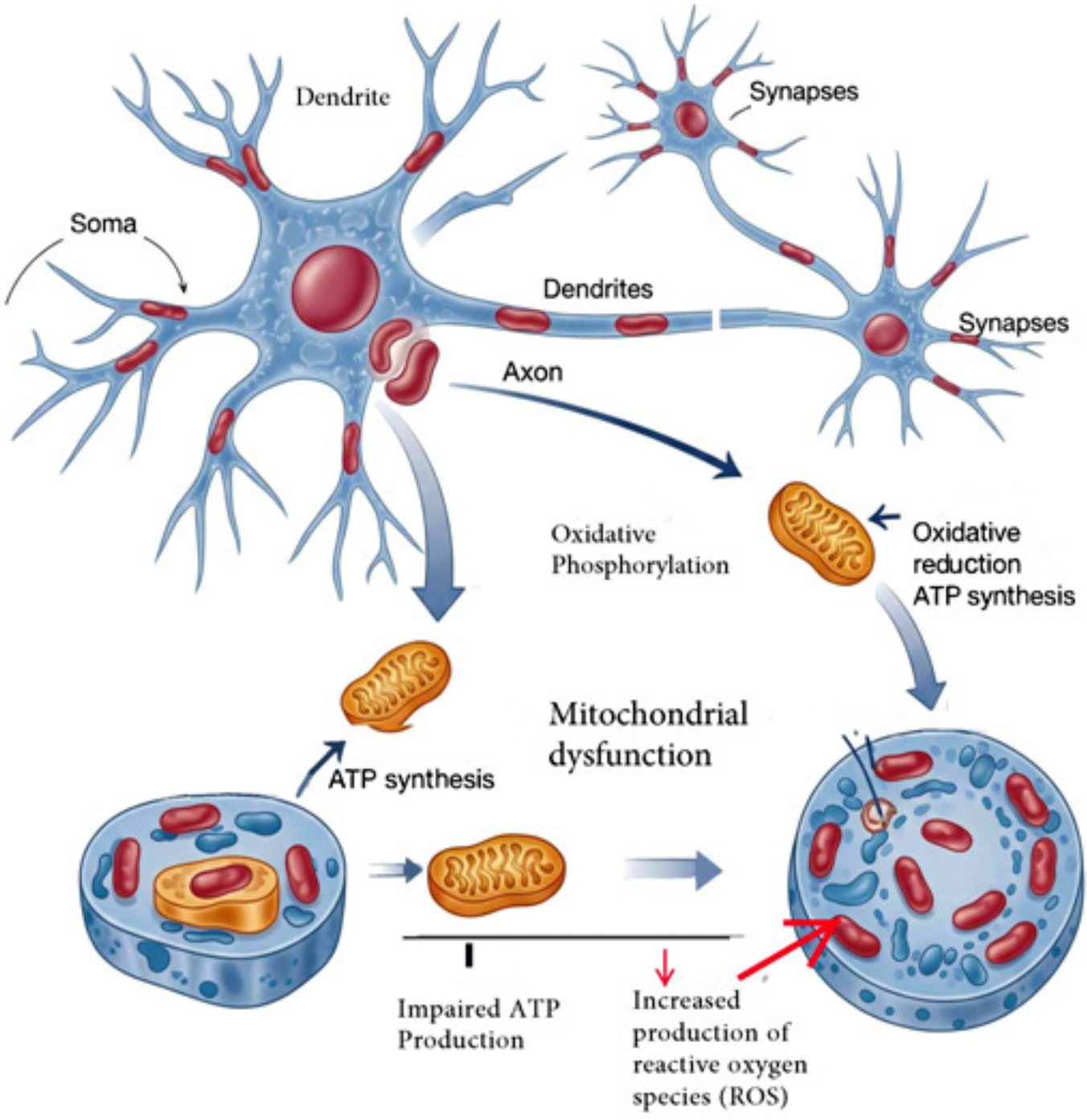


***Figure 2.7: A diagram of a neuron with mitochondria highlighted, illustrating their role in producing ATP (energy) and showing how dysfunction might lead to reduced energy and increased reactive oxygen species***

**Explanation of the Diagram:**
This diagram illustrates the crucial role of mitochondria within a neuron, particularly in energy production, and how their dysfunction can lead to detrimental effects.

- **Neuron Structure:** The diagram shows a typical neuron with its key components:
  - Soma (Cell Body): The main part of the neuron, containing the nucleus and other organelles.
  - Dendrites: Branch-like extensions that receive signals from other neurons.
  - Axon: A long, slender projection that transmits signals to other neurons.
  - Synapses: Junctions where neurons communicate with each other.

- **Mitochondria (Highlighted):** These are depicted as oval-shaped organelles, highlighted within the neuron. Mitochondria are often referred to as the "powerhouses" of the cell because they are responsible for generating most of the cell's supply of adenosine triphosphate (ATP), which is used as a source of chemical energy.

- **Role in ATP Production (Energy**):
  - The diagram illustrates the process of oxidative phosphorylation within the mitochondria. This is a metabolic pathway that uses oxygen to generate ATP.
  - Glucose (from food) is broken down, and its energy is used to create a proton gradient across the mitochondrial inner membrane.
  - The flow of protons back across the membrane drives the enzyme ATP synthase to produce large amounts of ATP. This ATP is then used to power all cellular processes, including neuronal signaling, maintaining ion gradients, and synthesizing neurotransmitters.

- **Mitochondrial Dysfunction and its Consequences:**
  - **Reduced Energy (ATP):** When mitochondria are dysfunctional (e.g., due to genetic mutations, oxidative stress, or toxins), their ability to produce ATP is compromised. This leads to an energy deficit within the neuron. Neurons are highly energy-demanding cells, and a lack of sufficient ATP can impair their ability to function correctly, leading to problems with signal transmission, maintenance of cellular integrity, and overall neuronal health.

  - **Increased Reactive Oxygen Species (ROS):** Mitochondrial dysfunction can also lead to an increase in the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS), also known as free radicals. ROS are highly reactive molecules that can cause oxidative damage to cellular components, including DNA, proteins, and lipids. This oxidative stress can further damage mitochondria, creating a vicious cycle, and contribute to neuronal degeneration.

## Protein Homeostasis and Autophagy

• Neurons depend on efficient clearance of misfolded proteins via autophagy lysosomal pathways.
• Impaired proteostasis results in toxic accumulation of aggregated proteins (e.g., amyloid-beta, tau, alpha-synuclein) [19].
• Genetic mutations affecting autophagy (e.g., mutations in progranulin, TMEM106B) are linked to familial dementia syndromes [20].

### Excitotoxicity

Excessive activation of excitatory neurotransmitter receptors, particularly N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) receptors by glutamate, can lead to an influx of calcium into neurons [21]. While calcium is essential for neuronal function, excessive levels can trigger a cascade of events leading to neuronal damage and death.

### Lysosomal Dysfunction

Lysosomes are cellular organelles responsible for waste degradation and recycling. Impaired lysosomal function leads to the accumulation of misfolded proteins and cellular debris, contributing to neurodegeneration.

### Axonal Transport Deficits

Neurons are highly dependent on efficient axonal transport to deliver essential molecules and organelles along their long axons. Disruptions in this transport system can lead to impaired synaptic function and ultimately, axonal degeneration.

| Mechanism | Description | Associated Dementia Types |
|---|---|---|
| **Mitochondrial Dysfunction** | Impaired ATP production, oxidative stress, and neuronal energy failure [22]. | AD, LBD, FTD |
| **Neuroinflammation** | Chronic microglial activation releases pro-inflammatory cytokines (TNF-α, IL-6) [23]. | AD, VaD, LBD |
| **Excitotoxicity** | Excessive glutamate causes $Ca^{2}$ overload, leading to neuronal death [24]. | AD, VaD |
| **Impaired Protein Clearance** | Dysfunctional autophagy and ubiquitin-proteasome systems lead to toxic aggregates [25]. | AD (Aβ, tau), LBD (α-synuclein) |

***Table 2: Key Pathophysiological Mechanisms in Dementia***

## Proteinopathies and Neurodegeneration

A defining feature of most neurodegenerative diseases, including many dementias, is the abnormal accumulation and aggregation of specific proteins within or outside neurons. These “proteinopathies” disrupt normal cellular processes and lead to neuronal dysfunction and death [26].

A defining feature of neurodegenerative dementias is selective vulnerability to misfolded proteins:

**Misfolding and Aggregation:** Proteins must fold into specific three-dimensional structures to function correctly. In proteinopathies, proteins misfold and aggregate into insoluble clumps, which are toxic to neurons. Misfolded proteins disrupt synaptic function, impair intracellular trafficking, and ultimately trigger cell death via apoptosis or necroptosis pathways. These aggregates can spread throughout the brain, contributing to disease progression [27].

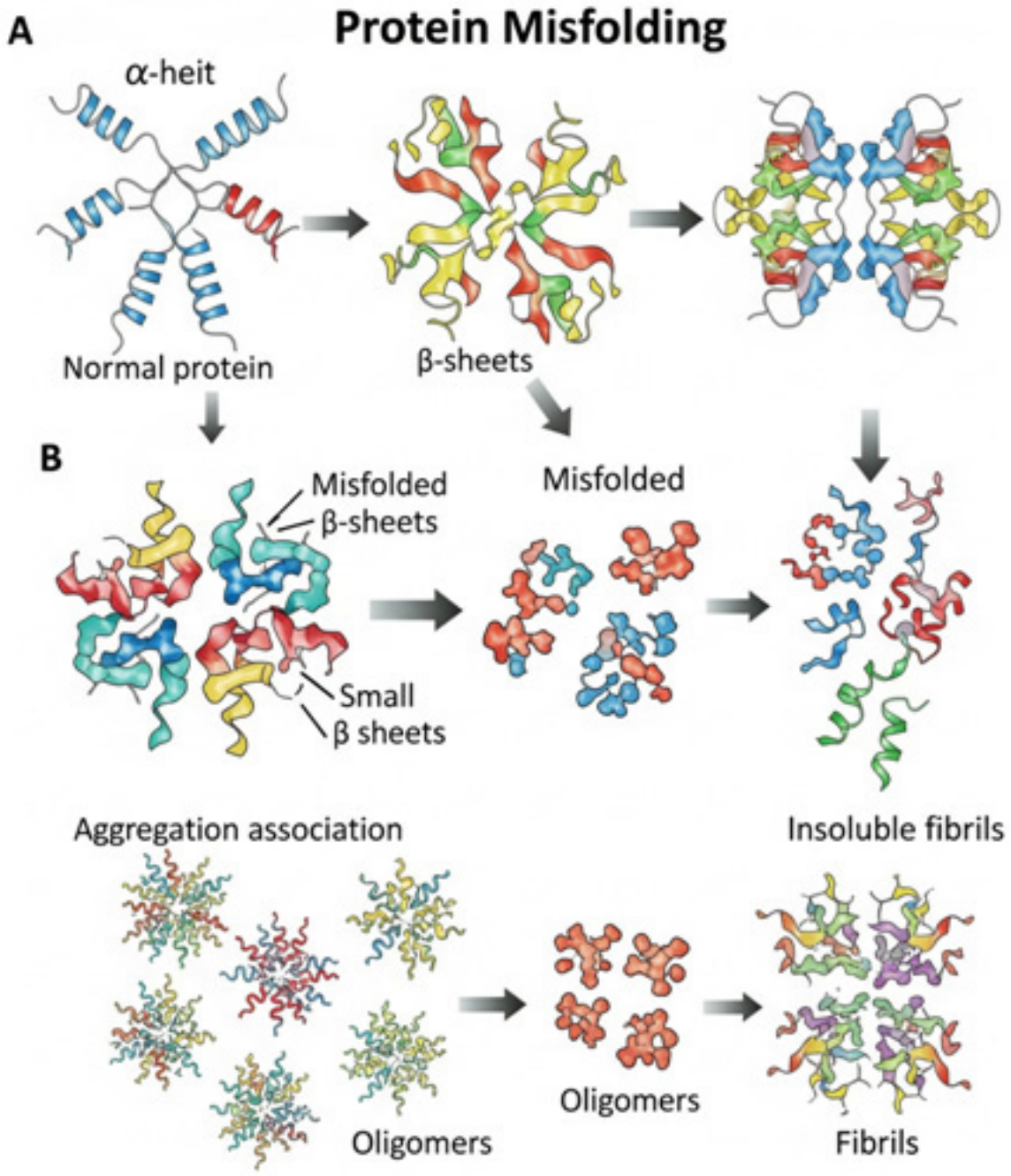


***Figure 2.8: A schematic illustrating the process of protein misfolding (e.g., from alpha-helix/beta-sheet structures to misfolded beta-sheets) and subsequent aggregation into oligomers and insoluble fibrils.***

**Prion-like Spread**: Emerging evidence suggests that some misfolded proteins, such as amyloid-beta and tau, can act in a "prion-like" manner, seeding the misfolding of normal proteins and propagating pathology across interconnected brain regions [28].

- Alzheimer's Disease: Amyloid-β plaques and tau tangles.
- Lewy Body Dementia: Alpha-synuclein inclusions.
- Frontotemporal Lobar Degeneration (FTLD): TDP-43, tau, or FUS aggregates.

| Protein | Aggregate Form | Associated Disease | Consequences |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Amyloid-β (Aβ)** | Extracellular plaques | Alzheimer's disease | Synaptic toxicity, inflammation, neurodegeneration [29]. |
| **Tau** | Neurofibrillary tangles | AD, FTD | Disrupts microtubules, impairs axonal transport [30]. |
| **Alpha-synuclein** | Lewy bodies | LBD, Parkinson's | Disrupts dopamine and acetylcholine signaling [31]. |

***Table 3: Major Proteinopathies in Dementia***

### Neuronal Damage and Synaptic Loss

The ultimate consequence of the aforementioned pathological processes is the progressive damage and loss of neurons (neurodegeneration) and, critically, the degradation of synapses.

There are stages that synapses path through:

• **Synaptic Plasticity and Function:** Synapses, the junctions between neurons, are where communication occurs. They are crucial for learning and memory through a process called synaptic plasticity (the ability of synapses to strengthen or weaken over time).

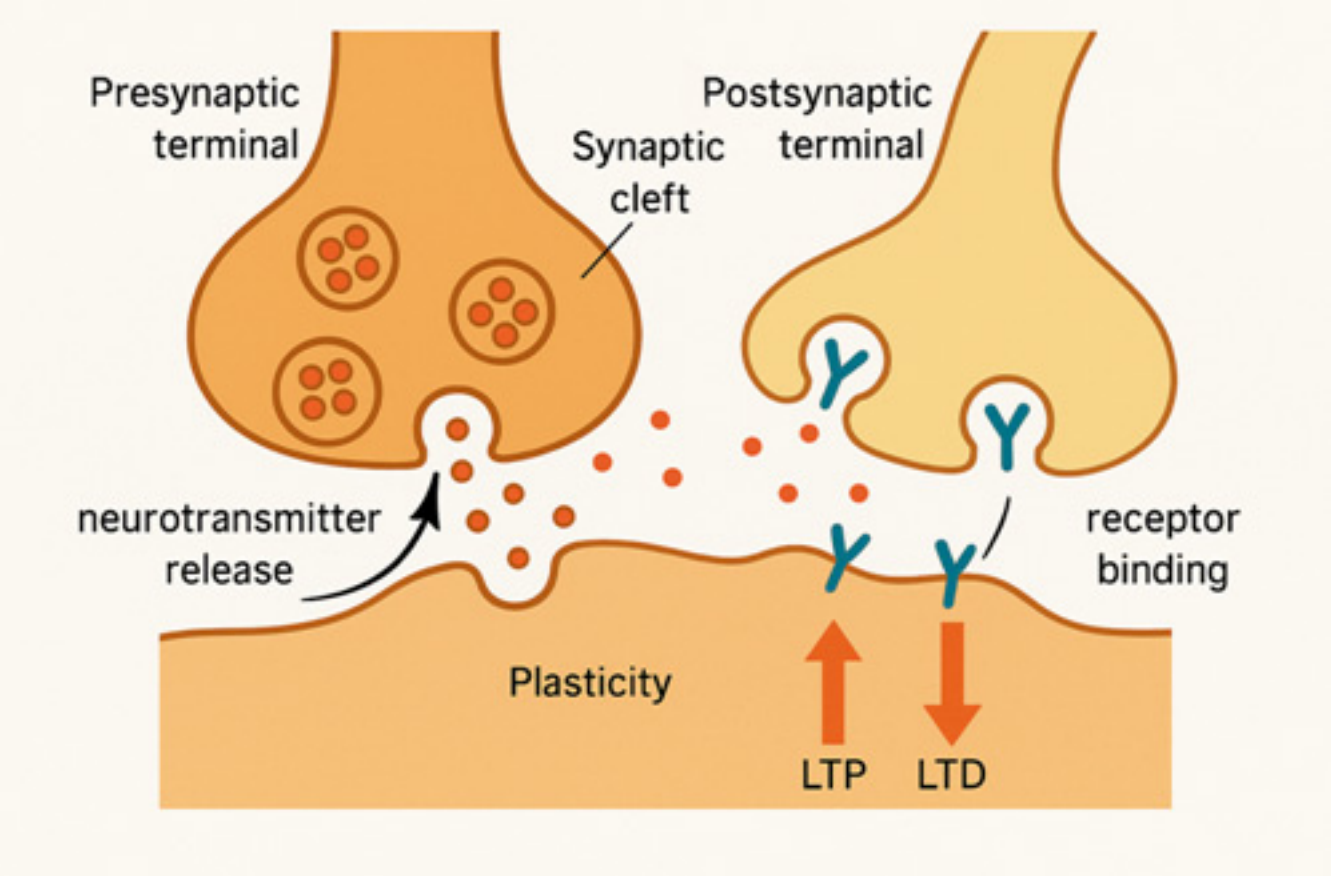


***Figure 2.9: A detailed diagram of a synapse, showing the presynaptic terminal, synaptic cleft, and postsynaptic terminal. Illustrates neurotransmitter release, receptor binding, and the concept of long-term potentiation (LTP) or depression (LTD) as examples of plasticity.***

• **Early Synaptic Dysfunction:** In many dementias, synaptic dysfunction and loss occur before significant neuronal death [32]. This early impairment in synaptic communication contributes significantly to cognitive deficits, particularly memory problems.

• **Neuronal Atrophy and Death:** As the disease progresses, sustained cellular stress and protein accumulation lead to neuronal atrophy (shrinking) and eventually, programmed cell death (apoptosis) or other forms of cell death. The pattern of neuronal loss varies depending on the specific dementia type, explaining the diverse clinical presentations.

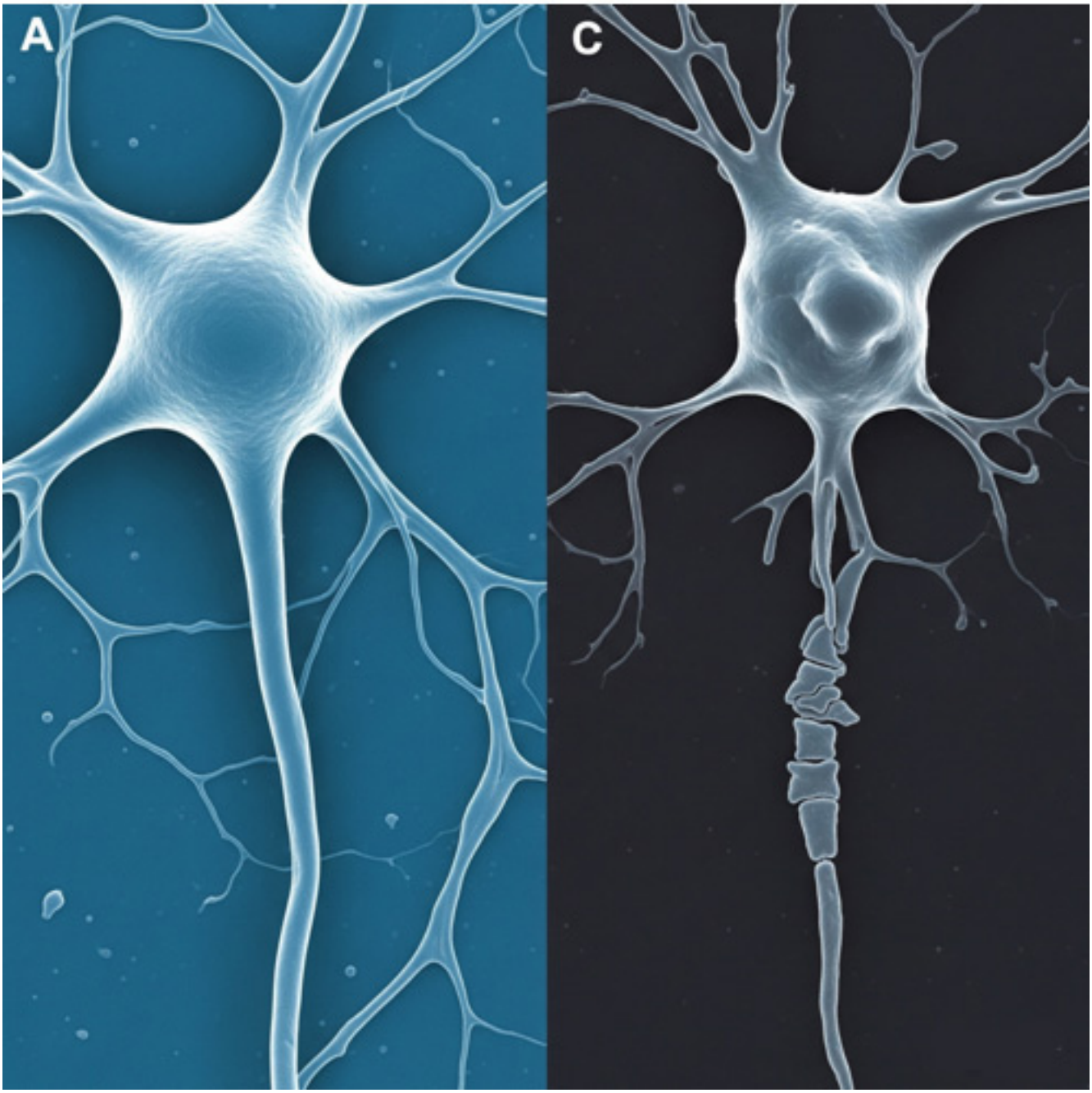


***Figure 2.10: Microscopic images comparing a healthy neuron (A) (well-defined soma, dendrites, axon) to an atrophied or degenerating neuron (C), highlighting morphological changes.***

Synaptic dysfunction is a pivotal early event in dementia pathophysiology:
• Dendritic spine loss observed in hippocampus and cortex in AD, correlating with memory deficits [33].
• Neurotransmitter system changes, such as cholinergic deficits in AD and dopaminergic dysfunction in Lewy body dementia, contribute to cognitive and motor symptoms [34].
• Synaptic vesicle proteins (e.g., synaptophysin) decrease before neuronal death, indicating synapse-specific vulnerability [35].

Synaptic disconnection leads to reduced network efficiency and cognitive slowing. Cognitive reserve may mitigate the clinical impact of early synaptic loss, explaining variable symptom severity [19].

## Role of Amyloid Plaques and Tau Tangles (Alzheimer's Disease)

Alzheimer's Disease (AD) is the most common cause of dementia, characterized by two hallmark proteinopathies [36]:

### Amyloid-β Pathophysiology

• Derived from sequential cleavage of amyloid precursor protein (APP) by β- and γ-secretases.
• Oligomeric Aβ species are neurotoxic, interfering with NMDA receptor signaling, long-term potentiation (LTP), and synaptic plasticity [37].

Amyloid plaques are thought to initiate a cascade of events leading to
Amyloid Plaques trigger microglial activation, further driving neuronal dysfunction, neurodegeneration and neuroinflammation.

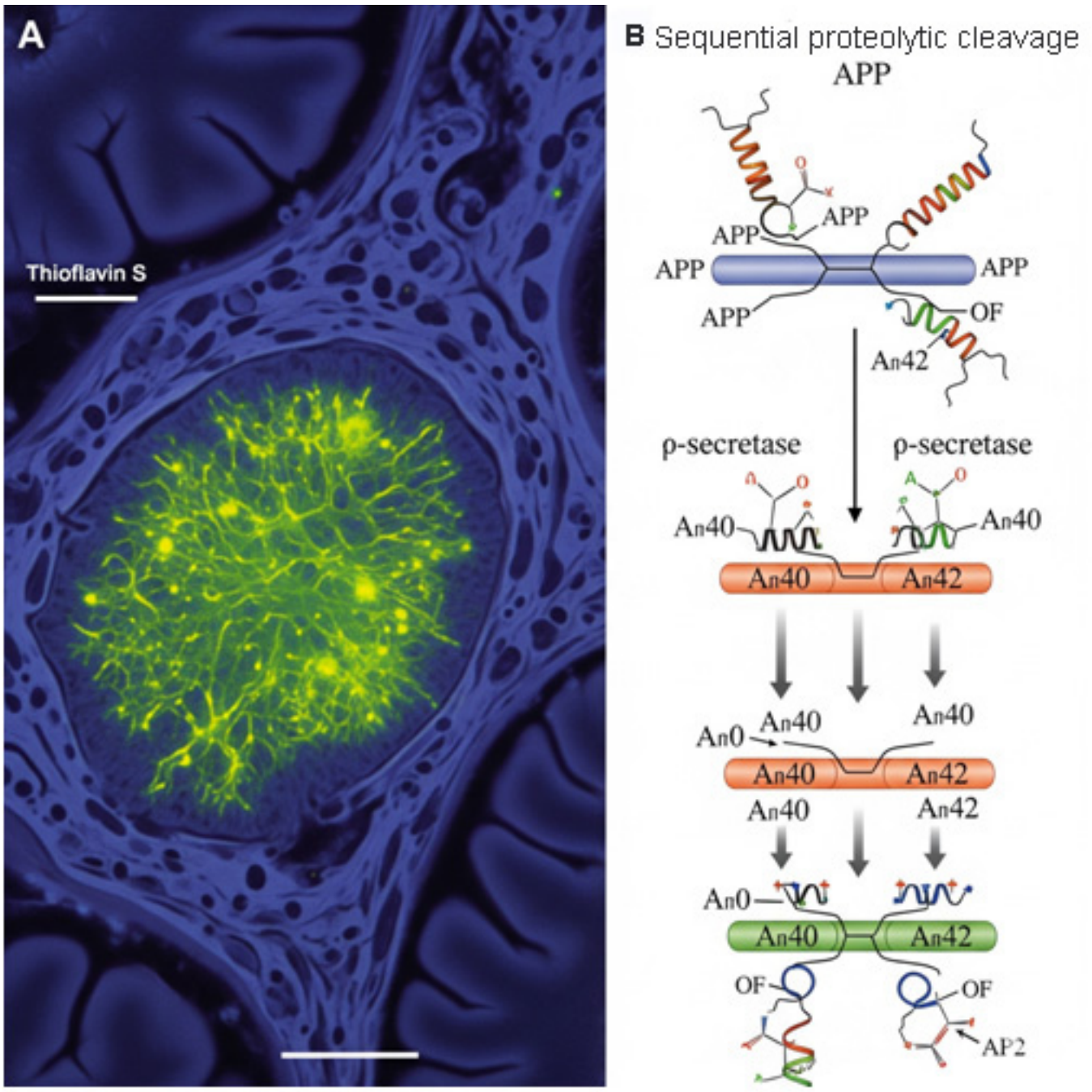


***Figure 2.11: A microscopic image of an amyloid plaque in brain tissue (e.g., stained with Congo red or thioflavin S) A schematic showing the sequential proteolytic cleavage of APP by β-secretase and γ-secretase to produce A$\beta$ peptides.***

**Tau Pathology**
Tau is a microtubule-associated protein that normally helps stabilize microtubules, which are essential for axonal transport and neuronal structure.

• Hyperphosphorylated tau aggregates into paired helical filaments forming neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs).
• Tau pathology spreads anatomically in a stereotyped pattern (Braak stages), beginning in transentorhinal cortex and progressing to neocortex [38].

While amyloid pathology may initiate the disease, tau pathology appears to be more directly linked to the progression of neuronal damage and clinical symptoms [39, 40].

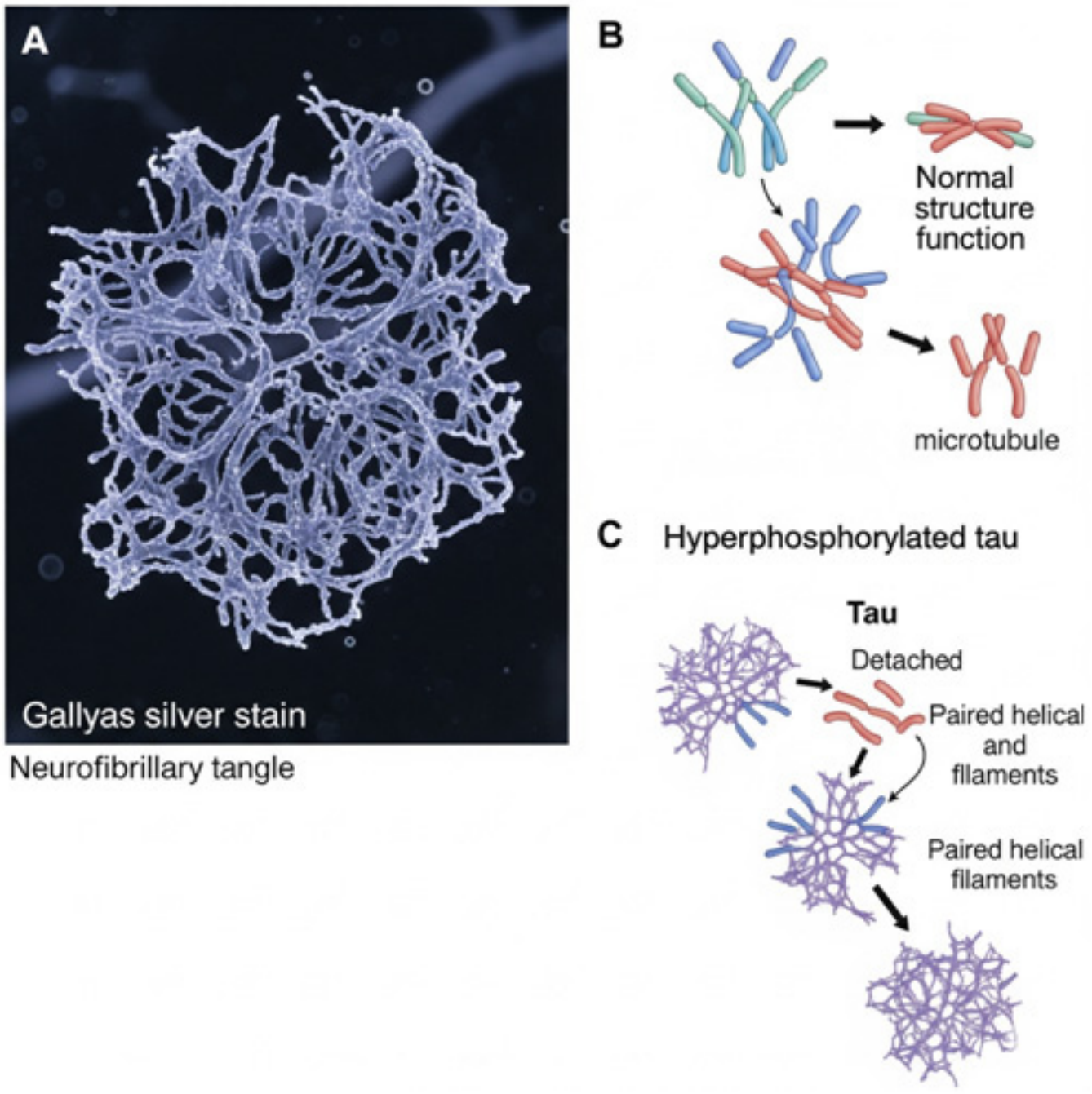


***Figure 2.12: A microscopic image of a neurofibrillary tangle (e.g., stained with Gallyas silver stain or an anti-tau antibody). Diagram showing normal tau protein binding to microtubules versus hyperphosphorylated tau detaching and forming paired helical filaments that aggregate into tangles.***

## Vascular Changes in Vascular Dementia

Vascular Dementia (VaD) is the second most common type of dementia, resulting from cerebrovascular disease that impairs blood flow to the brain [41].

Vascular dementia (VaD) encompasses:

### Cerebral Ischemia and Hypoxia

Reduced blood flow (ischemia) or complete lack of oxygen (hypoxia) to brain regions leads to neuronal damage and death.

This can be due to:
**o Strokes (infarcts):** Both large vessel strokes (e.g., affecting major arteries) and small vessel disease (affecting tiny blood vessels deep within the brain) can cause brain damage.
**o Chronic Hypoperfusion:** Sustained reduction in blood flow, even without overt strokes, can lead to cumulative neuronal damage over time, particularly affecting white matter. (42)
o Chronic small vessel ischemia results in white matter hyperintensities, lacunar infarcts, and microbleeds [42].

These may lead to slowed information processing, executive dysfunction, and gait disturbances.

### Cerebral Amyloid Angiopathy (CAA)

•c Amyloid deposits in vessel walls cause microhemorrhages and cortical superficial siderosis.
• Strongly associated with Alzheimer's pathology [26].
Mixed dementia, where vascular pathology coexists with neurodegenerative changes, is increasingly recognized in elderly populations [42].

### Blood-Brain Barrier Disruption

The blood-brain barrier (BBB) normally protects the brain from harmful substances. Vascular changes can compromise the BBB, leading to leakage of blood components and inflammatory molecules into the brain, further contributing to neuronal damage (43).

### White Matter Lesions

Small vessel disease often leads to widespread damage in the brain's white matter, disrupting communication pathways between different brain regions and manifesting as cognitive slowing and executive dysfunction [44].

### Microbleeds

Small hemorrhages in the brain, often associated with amyloid angiopathy (amyloid deposition in blood vessel walls), can contribute to cognitive decline and increase the risk of larger strokes.

## Alpha-Synuclein in Lewy Body Dementia

Alpha-synuclein is a small protein normally found in presynaptic terminals, involved in synaptic vesicle function and neurotransmitter release. In LBD, alpha-synuclein misfolds and aggregates into insoluble clumps called Lewy bodies (intracellular inclusions primarily found in neurons) and Lewy neurites (abnormal protein deposits in neuronal processes) [45].

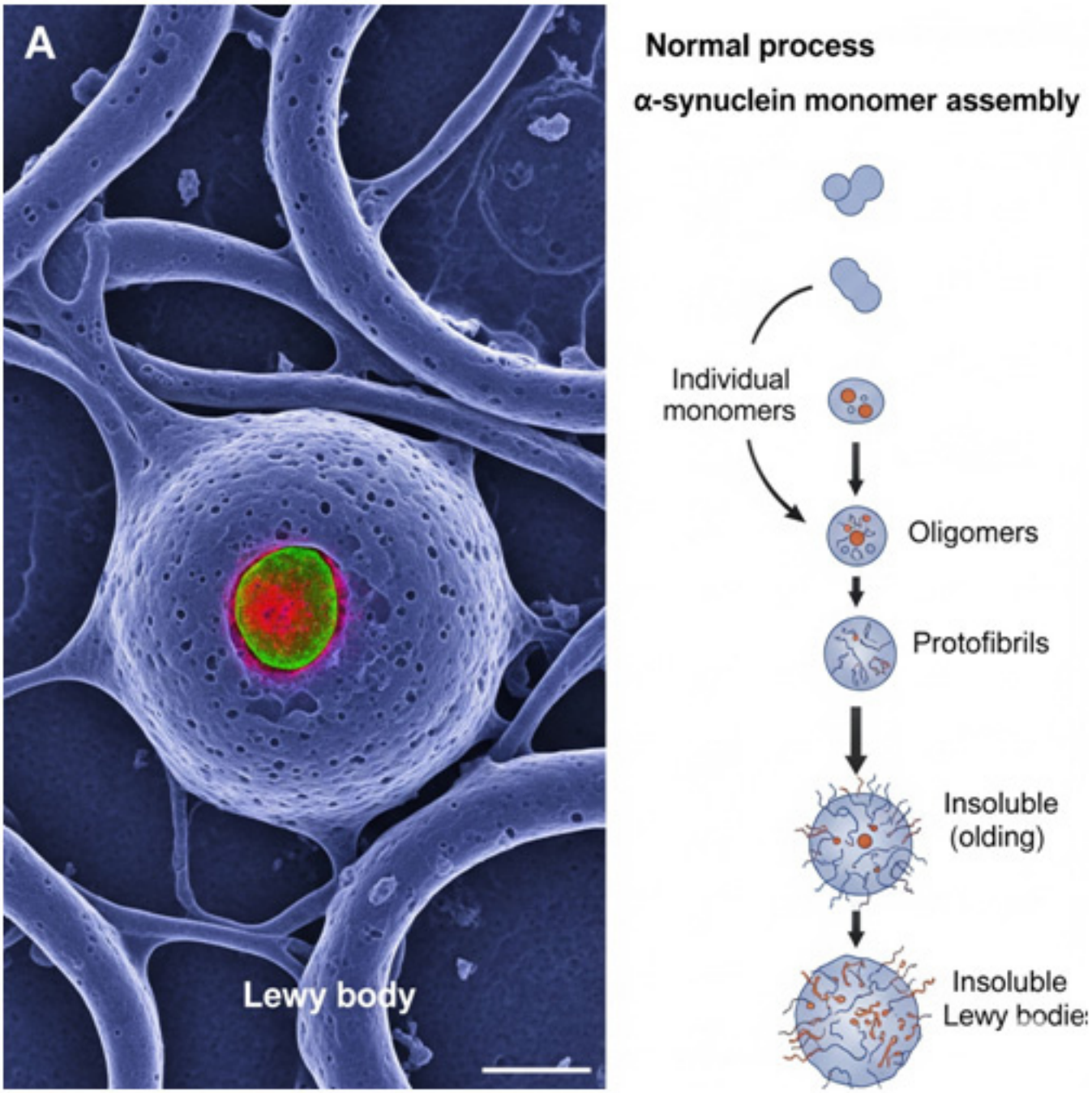


***Figure 2.13: A microscopic image of a Lewy body within the cytoplasm of a neuron (e.g., stained with alpha-synuclein antibody). Diagram showing normal alpha-synuclein monomers assembling into oligomers, then protofibrils, and finally forming insoluble Lewy bodies.***

**Lewy Body Dementia (LBD)** is a spectrum of disorders including Dementia with Lewy Bodies (DLB) and Parkinson's Disease Dementia (PDD), characterized by the abnormal accumulation of alpha-synuclein protein [45].

## Lewy Body Distribution

• In DLB, Lewy bodies are prominently found in the cerebral cortex, leading to cognitive fluctuations, visual hallucinations, and spontaneous parkinsonism.

• In PDD, Lewy bodies primarily affect the substantia nigra (a brain region involved in motor control) early in the disease, causing motor symptoms, with cognitive impairment developing later [45].[

## Pathogenic Mechanisms

**Neurotransmitter Imbalances:**

Alpha-synuclein pathology disrupts neurotransmitter systems, particularly dopaminergic pathways (contributing to motor symptoms) and cholinergic pathways (contributing to cognitive and psychiatric symptoms, especially visual hallucinations).

• Disrupts synaptic vesicle trafficking.
• Impairs mitochondrial function and axonal transport.
• Triggers neuroinflammation and oxidative stress [46].

**Mitochondrial and Lysosomal Dysfunction:**

Similar to other proteinopathies, alpha-synuclein aggregation can impair mitochondrial function and lysosomal degradation pathways, contributing to neuronal toxicity.

Lewy body pathology often overlaps with Alzheimer's pathology. Patients are sensitive to antipsychotic medications and may experience severe extrapyramidal side effects.

Emerging research shows real-time quaking-induced conversion (RT-QuIC) assays are promising for detecting alpha-synuclein aggregates in CSF as potential biomarkers [46].

**Comparison of Major Dementia Pathologies**

A quick comparison of the key neurobiological features discussed, in the various section is presented in the table below.

**Key Neurobiological Features of Major Dementia Types**

| Feature | Alzheimer's Disease (AD) | Vascular Dementia (VaD) | Lewy Body Dementia (LBD) |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Primary Proteinopathy** | Amyloid-beta (α\β) plaques and hyperphosphorylated tau (Neurofibrillary Tangles) | Not a proteinopathy; related to vascular injury | Alpha-synuclein (Lewy bodies & Lewy neurites) |
| **Key Brain Regions Affected** | Hippocampus, entorhinal cortex, neocortex (progressive) | White matter, basal ganglia, cortex (ischemic lesions) | Brainstem (substantia nigra), cerebral cortex, limbic system |
| **Microscopic Hallmarks** | Amyloid plaques (extracellular), Neurofibrillary Tangles (intracellular) | Infarcts (strokes), white matter lesions, microbleeds | Lewy bodies (intracellular), Lewy neurites |
| **Primary Mechanism** | Synaptic dysfunction, neuronal death from α\β and tau | Ischemia/hypoxia, blood-brain barrier disruption, loss of l connectivity | Disruption of neurotransmission, mitochondrial/lysosomal dysfunction, neuronal death |
| **Typical Onset Symptoms** | Progressive memory loss | Cognitive slowing, executive dysfunction, focal neurological deficits (post-stroke) | Cognitive fluctuations, visual hallucinations, parkinsonism |

## Conclusion

The neurobiology of dementia reveals a complex interplay of protein misfolding, neuroinflammation, vascular pathology, and network disintegration. Despite distinct pathological hallmarks, considerable overlap exists among different dementias, reflecting shared molecular cascades. A deeper understanding of these mechanisms fuels the development of disease-modifying therapies and precise diagnostic biomarkers, heralding an era of personalized dementia care.

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