Acta Scientific MEDICAL SCIENCES (ISSN: 2582-0931)

Volume 9 Issue 4 April 2025

Review Article

Bioaccumulation of Microplastics in Decedent Human Brains

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Received: February 07, 2025

Published: March 05, 2025

DOI: 10.31080/ASMS.2025.09.2045

Abstract

Microplastics and nano-plastics (MNPs) have become a pervasive environmental pollutant, raising concerns about their potential health effects. This review examines the bioaccumulation of MNPs in human brain tissues and their possible implications for neurodegenerative diseases. The study highlights that brain tissue accumulates higher concentrations of MNPs compared to the liver and kidney, with polyethylene being the most dominant polymer. Additionally, dementia patients exhibit significantly higher MNP levels, suggesting a potential link to neuroinflammation and cerebrovascular pathology. The mechanisms by which MNPs infiltrate the brain, such as blood-brain barrier penetration, are discussed alongside their associated health risks. The article calls for urgent research on MNP exposure routes, long-term health effects, and regulatory actions to mitigate plastic pollution.

Keywords: Microplastics; Nano-plastics; Bioaccumulation; Blood-Brain Barrier; Neurodegeneration; Dementia; Environmental Pollution; Human Health; Plastic Exposure; Public Health

Introduction

Microplastics (MPs) and nano-plastics (NPs) have emerged as an environmental and public health concern due to their pervasive presence in ecosystems and their potential for bioaccumulation in living organisms. These synthetic polymer particles, measuring less than 5 mm in diameter, originate from industrial processes, consumer products, and the degradation of larger plastic waste. Humans are exposed to MPs and NPs through multiple pathways, including ingestion, inhalation, and dermal absorption.

Recent research has highlighted the alarming presence of MPs and NPs in human tissues, including the gastrointestinal tract, lungs, and bloodstream. However, the discovery of microplastics in the brain has raised critical concerns regarding their neurotoxic effects and potential links to neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. The ability of MNPs to cross the blood-brain barrier (BBB) poses significant risks, leading to inflammation, oxidative stress, and cellular damage in neural tissues.

The increasing detection of MNPs in post-mortem brain samples underscores the urgency to understand their sources, accumulation patterns, and long-term consequences on human health. This review aims to examine the mechanisms of MNP infiltration into the brain, their interactions with neural tissues, and potential mitigation strategies to reduce exposure and enhance detoxification.

Methodology

This review is based on a comprehensive analysis of peer-reviewed literature, scientific reports, and recent empirical studies on MNP accumulation in human tissues. Data from clinical autopsies, spectroscopic imaging, and chemical analyses were compiled to assess the presence and composition of MNPs in decedent brain tissues. The selected studies employed pyrolysis gas chromatography–mass spectrometry (Py-GC-MS) [1-4], Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy [5], and electron microscopy [6] to detect and quantify MNPs in brain, liver, and kidney samples. Additionally, epidemiological data were analyzed to explore correlations between MNP exposure and neurological disorders such as dementia [7].

Key findings

Microplastic accumulation in the brain

- The study confirms the presence of MNPs in the human brain, with concentrations surpassing those found in the liver and kidney [8].
- A striking increase in brain MNP levels was observed, with median concentrations rising from 3,345 μg/g in 2016 to 4,917 μg/g in 2024 [9].
- These findings correlate with increasing environmental MNP pollution over time, raising concerns about long-term exposure and accumulation [10].

Composition of brain MNPs

- Polyethylene (PE) was the dominant plastic type, accounting for 75% of the total MNPs detected [11].
- Other significant polymers included polypropylene (PP), polyvinyl chloride (PVC), and styrene-butadiene rubber (SBR) [12].
- Electron microscopy revealed that MNPs in brain tissues predominantly existed as nanoscale shard-like fragments, which may facilitate their transport across biological barriers [13].

Dementia and microplastic accumulation

- Individuals diagnosed with dementia exhibited over five times higher MNP concentrations in brain tissues compared to those without the condition. This observational data highlights an association but does not establish a causal relationship [14].
- Notable plastic deposits were found in cerebrovascular walls and immune cells, suggesting a potential role in neuroinflammation and vascular pathology. However, whether these deposits contribute to disease progression or are a consequence of other pathological processes remains to be determined [15].
- The study provides preliminary evidence linking MNP accumulation to neurodegenerative conditions, necessitating further investigation to explore potential mechanisms and causal relationships [16].

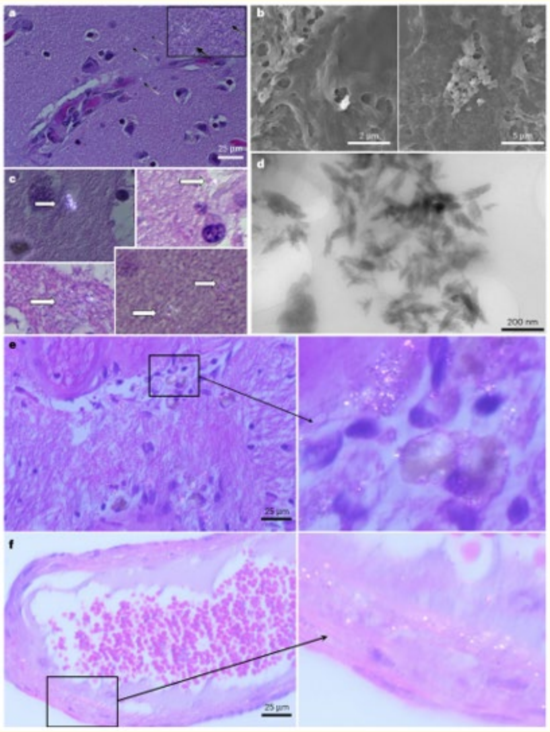

Figure 1: Visualization of putative plastics in the brain. a,b, Polarization wave microscopy (a, black arrows indicate refractory inclusions; inset is a digital magnification for clarity) and SEM (b, visual fields are 15.4 and 20.1 μm wide) were used to scan sections of brain from decedent human samples. c, Large (>1 μm) inclusions were not observed; additional polarization wave examples are highlighted (white arrows highlight submicron refractory inclusions). Resolution limitations of these technologies drove the use of TEM to examine the extracts from the pellets used for Py-GC/MS. d, Example TEM images resolved innumerable shard- or flake-like solid particulates following dispersion, with dimensions largely <200 nm in length and <40 nm in width. e,f, Polarization wave microscopy reveals substantially more refractile inclusions in dementia cases, especially in regions with associated immune cell accumulation (e) and along the vascular walls (f). All images were collected on a small subset of participants (n = 10 for normal brains; n = 3 for dementia cases) to provide visual evidence to support analytical chemistry.

Mechanisms of brain infiltration and potential health risks

- The blood-brain barrier (BBB) is traditionally considered a protective filter against toxins; however, the study suggests that nanoscale plastic fragments may penetrate the BBB via transcytosis or disruption of endothelial integrity [17].
- Neuroinflammatory responses, oxidative stress, and microglial activation were observed in MNP-laden brain samples, suggesting a potential association between MNP accumulation and neurodegenerative processes. However, whether MNP exposure directly contributes to these pathological changes or is coincidental remains to be further investigated [18].
- The systemic distribution of MNPs across vital organs suggests multiple potential exposure routes, including inhalation, ingestion, and dermal absorption [19].

Solutions to microplastic pollution

- **Regulatory Measures:** Governments must implement stricter regulations on plastic production, use, and waste management to curb environmental contamination [20].
- **Waste Management and Recycling:** Enhanced recycling technologies and waste management systems should be prioritized to prevent plastic leakage into ecosystems [21].
- **Alternative Materials:** The development and promotion of biodegradable plastics and sustainable alternatives can help reduce reliance on petroleum-based polymers [22].
- **Public Awareness and Behavioural Changes:** Educating the public on reducing plastic consumption, proper waste disposal, and the dangers of microplastic pollution can drive change at the individual level [23].
- **Scientific Advancements:** Continued research into the degradation, transport, and biological effects of MNPs will be crucial for devising effective mitigation strategies [24].

Solutions to microplastics from the brain and other organs

MasterPeace Z® in SOLergy® Sea Minerals: A scientifically developed detoxification solution designed to bind and facilitate the removal of microplastics and nanoplastics from the body. Research indicates that zeolite-based compounds, such as MasterPeace Z®, exhibit high affinity for microplastic particles, aiding in their clearance through natural elimination pathways. Studies have demonstrated its effectiveness in reducing microplastic levels in the body, though further research is warranted to explore its potential applications in mitigating microplastic bioaccumulation in human tissues [25].

Conclusion

The bioaccumulation of microplastics in human tissues, particularly the brain, presents a growing concern for public health. Emerging scientific evidence suggests that MNPs infiltrate biological barriers, and are associated with inflammation, oxidative stress, and neurodegenerative conditions. While these findings highlight a potential link, further research is necessary to determine causality and underlying mechanisms. The findings underscore the urgent need for regulatory policies, waste management strategies, and scientific innovations to mitigate plastic pollution. Furthermore, the use of detoxification strategies such as MasterPeace Z® in SOLergy® Sea Minerals shows promise in facilitating the removal of microplastics from the body. Future research including longitudinal studies is essential to assess long-term exposure risks and to develop targeted interventions to reduce the human micro- and nano-plastic burden.

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