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Use of Antidepressants in Microgravity: A Review Article on Challenges and Strategies

Ruksar Sadique Shaikh¹, Prathamesh Vinod Vaidya², Dahlia Raut³

¹Allana College of Pharmacy, Pune, ²National Institute of Pharmaceutical Education and Research, Guwahati, ³Aston Pharmacy School, Aston University, Birmingham, UK.

Corresponding Author Mail Id: prathvaidya1310@gmail.com

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Abstract:

As space agencies plan for extended human presence on Mars and other celestial bodies, preserving astronaut mental health becomes a mission-critical objective. Microgravity, combined with environmental stressors such as isolation, circadian disruption, and confinement, increases the risk of psychological disorders, particularly depression. Antidepressants, including selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs), remain the cornerstone of pharmacological intervention. However, microgravity alters human physiology in ways that significantly affect drug pharmacokinetics and pharmacodynamics—impacting absorption, plasma distribution, hepatic metabolism, and renal clearance. This necessitates a reevaluation of current dosing strategies and drug delivery methods. Furthermore, microgravity-associated issues such as bone demineralization, vestibular dysfunction, and impaired immune responses may interact with antidepressant efficacy or tolerability. Advances in pharmaceuticals, including transdermal systems, 3D-printed drug formulations, and intranasal delivery, offer promising routes to maintain therapeutic levels with reduced systemic burden. This review highlights key physiological challenges in space pharmacology and examines innovative pharmaceutical strategies to optimize antidepressant therapy for long-duration missions, with particular emphasis on stability, delivery, and bioavailability in extraterrestrial environments.

Introduction:

As space agencies prepare for long-duration missions to destinations like Mars, ensuring astronaut well-being has become a top priority. While the physical challenges of space travel—like microgravity, radiation, and confinement—are well-documented, the psychological effects are receiving growing attention. Astronauts face stressors such as isolation, disrupted sleep, limited social interaction, and the disorienting impact of microgravity. These conditions can lead to mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and mood

disturbances, all of which can impair judgment, focus, and mission success.

To manage these risks, antidepressants—commonly used on Earth—are being considered for use in space. However, the microgravity environment complicates their use. It alters how the body absorbs, distributes, and responds to medications, meaning that drugs designed for Earth may not work the same way in orbit. This calls for a better understanding of how antidepressants behave in space and possibly the development of new



formulations suited to the space environment.

Microgravity affects nearly every system in the body. It changes cardiovascular function, weakens muscles and bones, and disrupts the central nervous system. These physiological shifts, along with changes in the vestibular system—which controls balance and spatial orientation—can increase disorientation and worsen mental health challenges. They may also affect how drugs interact with the brain, raising concerns about both safety and effectiveness.

Innovative drug delivery methods are emerging as promising solutions. Technologies like transdermal patches, intranasal sprays, and 3D-printed medications offer more precise, controlled, and user-friendly ways to administer antidepressants in space. These could help maintain drug efficacy and reduce side effects, supporting astronaut mental health on long missions.

This review explores how antidepressants function in microgravity, the obstacles they face, and potential pharmaceutical innovations to improve their use during spaceflight. With continued research, it's possible to develop effective mental health treatments tailored specifically for the unique demands of space travel.

Challenges in Antidepressant Drug Management in Microgravity

Space travel introduces a unique set of challenges that significantly affect human physiology. These challenges become especially relevant when considering the management of antidepressant medications for astronauts during long-duration missions. The microgravity environment alters many biological processes that are crucial for the proper functioning of antidepressant drugs. These alterations include changes in drug absorption, distribution, metabolism, and excretion

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(ADME), which can lead to deviations in the effectiveness and safety of these medications.

1. Altered Pharmacokinetics and Pharmacodynamics

In microgravity, the lack of gravitational forces disrupts the normal functioning of bodily systems. This can lead to significant changes in how the body processes medications. On Earth, gravity plays a vital role in regulating the movement of fluids through the body, such as in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract. In space, the absence of gravity affects the peristaltic movement of the GI tract, which can result in delayed gastric emptying and altered absorption rates for orally administered drugs. Consequently, antidepressants that rely on gastrointestinal absorption may not be absorbed as efficiently or predictably as they would be on Earth.

Moreover, the distribution of drugs throughout the body may be influenced by fluid shifts in microgravity. In a microgravity environment, bodily fluids tend to shift upward toward the head, leading to changes in blood volume, cardiac output, and tissue perfusion. This redistribution of fluids could impact the concentration of antidepressants in the bloodstream and their subsequent distribution to the brain, where their effects are most needed. Altered plasma protein binding and changes in tissue volume can further complicate the pharmacokinetics of these drugs, leading to either subtherapeutic or toxic drug levels.

Metabolism, primarily occurring in the liver, can also be altered by spaceflight. Changes in liver enzyme activity due to microgravity could affect the rate at which antidepressants are metabolized, potentially leading to variations in drug half-life and therapeutic efficacy. Additionally, the altered circadian rhythms that astronauts experience can influence



metabolic processes and affect the timing and effectiveness of antidepressant medications.

2. Impact of Psychological and Physiological Stressors on Antidepressant Efficacy

The psychological stressors faced by astronauts, including isolation, confinement, and disrupted sleep patterns, are known to impact mental health. Depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders are prevalent in this population, which makes antidepressant therapy an essential component of managing astronauts' well-being. However, the efficacy of antidepressants in microgravity may be compromised by these stressors. Stressors such as sleep deprivation and altered circadian rhythms can affect neurotransmitter regulation and may reduce the effectiveness of antidepressant medications. Sleep disturbances, common in space, can exacerbate the symptoms of depression and undermine the positive effects of antidepressants. Since antidepressants typically require several weeks to show clinical effects, continuous monitoring and adjustment of dosage may be necessary to ensure optimal therapeutic outcomes for astronauts who are experiencing these additional stressors. Additionally, prolonged exposure to the stressors of space travel can lead to physical changes in the body that complicate the management of antidepressants. For instance, astronauts may experience significant bone loss, muscle atrophy, and changes in neuroplasticity, which can affect mood regulation and make depression more difficult to treat. These physical changes may alter the way antidepressants interact with the body, requiring adjustments to dosage and treatment protocols.

3. Drug Delivery System Limitations

Traditional drug delivery methods, such as oral tablets or injections, may not be ideal

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for use in space due to the microgravity environment. In microgravity, astronauts face challenges in swallowing solid medications, and the handling and storage of liquid medications can become cumbersome. As a result, there is a growing need for innovative drug delivery systems that are more suited to the space environment.

Transdermal patches have been proposed as a potential solution for delivering antidepressants in space. These patches would allow for a steady, controlled release of medication over time, reducing the need for frequent administration and minimizing the risk of human error. Furthermore, transdermal delivery could bypass the GI tract, avoiding the issues of altered absorption in microgravity. However, the challenge remains in ensuring that these patches maintain consistent drug release and efficacy during long-duration space missions.

Another promising delivery method is the use of inhalation therapies or intranasal formulations, which could allow for faster absorption into the bloodstream. These methods offer the potential for rapid onset of action, which could be beneficial in managing acute depressive episodes or anxiety attacks that might occur during space travel.

3D-printed medications are also being explored as an alternative to traditional drug formulations. These medications can be tailored to an astronaut's individual needs, allowing for personalized dosages and release profiles. 3D printing also provides the opportunity to create more compact and efficient drug delivery systems, which is critical in the limited space available on spacecraft.

4. Long-term Safety and Monitoring of Antidepressant Use

The long-term use of antidepressants in space presents additional concerns



regarding safety and monitoring. Given the extended duration of space missions, the continuous use of antidepressants could lead to the accumulation of side effects or the development of drug resistance. Routine monitoring of astronauts' mental and physical health will be necessary to identify potential issues early and adjust treatment as needed.

Space agencies, including NASA, have established systems for monitoring astronaut health, but the unique challenges posed by microgravity will require novel approaches to ensure the safe use of antidepressants. Biomarkers and advanced diagnostic tools could be developed to track the effectiveness of antidepressant medications and detect any adverse effects that may arise during space missions.

Strategies and Solutions for Antidepressant Drug Management in Microgravity

To ensure astronauts remain mentally healthy during long missions—such as a journey to Mars—it's essential to adopt targeted strategies that maintain the effectiveness and safety of antidepressant treatments.

1. Personalized Medicine and Genetic Profiling

Tailoring treatments based on an astronaut's genetic makeup—also known as pharmacogenetics—can significantly improve antidepressant outcomes. Genetic testing could identify how individuals metabolize drugs, especially through variations in enzymes like CYP450, which influence how antidepressants break down in the body. This personalized approach would allow mission planners to choose the most effective medication and dosage before launch, helping to avoid side effects and improve treatment success.

2. Innovative Drug Delivery Methods

Microgravity can interfere with how drugs are absorbed and distributed. To counter

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this, researchers are exploring advanced delivery systems. Transdermal patches, for example, offer steady, controlled drug release through the skin—bypassing the digestive system, which behaves unpredictably in space. Intranasal sprays and inhalable therapies offer another promising route, delivering medication quickly and effectively without needing to swallow pills—an often awkward task in zero gravity. In addition, 3D printing of medications on board spacecraft could allow for customizable dosing and compact storage, making it easier to adapt treatments as needed over the course of long missions.

3. Combining Therapy with Psychosocial Support

Medication alone may not be enough. Combining drug therapy with behavioural interventions like cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and mindfulness practices could enhance resilience and coping strategies. Tools such as virtual reality (VR) environments may help astronauts combat isolation and maintain emotional engagement. Regular communication with mental health professionals, as well as with loved ones back on Earth, would also play a key role in maintaining psychological well-being. Daily routines, structured exercise, and stress-reduction techniques like guided meditation can further support mental health, especially when integrated into the broader treatment plan.

4. Continuous Monitoring and Real-Time Adjustments

Ongoing mental health monitoring is essential during long missions. Wearable tech and biosensors could track sleep patterns, stress levels, and vital signs to detect early signs of mood changes. These tools would allow ground teams to adjust treatments remotely through telemedicine, ensuring timely support even millions of miles from Earth.



Emerging technologies like non-invasive brain monitoring (e.g., EEG) could eventually help assess how medications are working on a neurological level, allowing for more precise and responsive treatment strategies.

5. Designing Space-Specific Antidepressant Formulations

Finally, there's a need to develop antidepressants that are optimized for the conditions of space. These could include formulations with improved stability, absorption, and solubility in microgravity, especially for delivery methods like patches or inhalation. While this area is still in early research stages, space-specific medications could make a critical difference in ensuring astronauts have reliable access to effective treatment throughout extended missions.

Ethical Guidelines for Cosmonauts Before Space Missions

As space travel evolves, ethical considerations regarding the health and safety of cosmonauts are becoming more important.

1. **Exposure to Radiation and Health Risks:** One of the biggest concerns for cosmonauts before heading into space is radiation exposure. Current technology doesn't offer sufficient protection against the dangers of radiation, especially on long missions. For missions beyond Earth's orbit, such as those to Mars, the risks are even harder to predict. The potential impact on their health over the long term is uncertain, and it's challenging to communicate these unknown risks clearly. Moreover, with the immense distance to destinations like Mars, returning to Earth in an emergency may not even be possible. This means cosmonauts must commit fully to the mission with the understanding that their

ability to withdraw might be limited.

2. **Reassessing Radiation Exposure Metrics:** To enhance safety, it's crucial that NASA reexamines the radiation exposure limits currently set for astronauts. These limits should reflect the risk of radiation-related illnesses or even death. Furthermore, we must account for physiological differences, such as the varying radiation tolerance between male and female astronauts. For instance, younger female astronauts may need different radiation intake thresholds than older male astronauts. As we adjust these limits, it's essential to ensure fairness and transparency—astronauts must be fully informed about any potential changes to their radiation exposure and what those changes might mean for their health.
3. **Ethical Decision Framework for Mission Participation:** In order to guide ethical decisions regarding space missions, NASA proposes a multi-level approach. This involves assessing: (i) the ethics of taking on health risks for the mission, (ii) the ethics of decision-making for each mission, and (iii) the criteria for selecting mission crews. This framework could help introduce waivers for missions, especially those to Mars, where the exposure limits might not align with current standards. It would also ensure that astronauts have all the necessary information, including the latest research findings, to make an informed and ethical choice to participate in these missions.
4. **Ethical Recruitment and Informed Consent:** Recruiting



astronauts for space missions must always be based on informed consent, a principle that goes beyond just understanding the physical risks. Cosmonauts must be aware of the psychological challenges and emotional tolls that come with the harsh environment of space, as well as any experimental treatments or medications they might be subjected to. Ethics principles such as fairness, respect, and beneficence should guide all recruitment and decision-making processes. With the rise of commercial space travel, where non-professional astronauts are now involved, these ethical considerations are becoming more complex. New strategies are needed to ensure all astronauts, regardless of their background, are treated fairly and are fully informed about the risks.

5. **Increasing Knowledge for Future Safety:** To ensure astronauts' safety, ongoing research into the effects of space travel on the human body is essential. Both government and private missions are increasingly focused on understanding how space affects astronauts physically and psychologically. As more people travel to outer space, it's crucial that we gain more knowledge about the biological effects of space environments. Since medical support in space is limited, astronauts and their teams need to be prepared to manage health issues

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independently and monitor conditions without the luxury of immediate expert intervention.

Conclusion

Space travel presents incredible opportunities—but it also brings serious challenges, especially when it comes to the mental health of astronauts. Life in space, marked by isolation, disrupted sleep cycles, and the effects of microgravity, can take a toll on psychological well-being, increasing the risk of depression and other mental health issues.

While antidepressants like SSRIs and SNRIs are commonly used on Earth, their effectiveness and safety in space are far less certain. Microgravity can change how drugs are absorbed and processed by the body, making it harder to predict their effects. On top of that, the side effects of these medications might be riskier or harder to manage in space.

Because of this, there's a growing need to rethink how we treat depression beyond Earth. Future research should look at ways to adapt existing medications for space use, develop safer delivery methods, and even explore biological or neuroplasticity-based approaches. Personalized and flexible treatments that take into account the unique mental and environmental stressors of long missions—like a trip to Mars—will be crucial.

Ultimately, maintaining the mental health of astronauts is just as important as keeping them physically fit. As we push the boundaries of exploration, investing in space-specific mental health strategies will be key to the success and sustainability of future missions.

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