Neural plasticity resulting from task repetition is reduced in Multiple Sclerosis

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Introduction

- Task repetition in young healthy adults results in decreases in fMRI activation with maintained performance levels. This effect has been interpreted as reflecting increasing efficiency due to learning.
- Hallmark patterns of Multiple Sclerosis (MS) brain function during working memory (WM) tasks include:
  1. Greater fMRI activity within regions also activated by healthy adults, interpreted as reflecting a state of neural inefficiency.
  2. Additional brain regions active, interpreted as compensatory recruitment of additional neural resources, presumably through long-term functional reorganization.
- Previous studies averaged activity across entire scanning session.

Study aim: Test whether overall activity differences between MS patients and controls in WM tasks are related to differences in these normal, rapid, learning-related adaptations during task repetition.

Predictions

1. Changes occurring with task repetition:
   - Regions recruited by patients & controls
   - Controls
   - Patients

2. Greater activity across all runs:
   - Regions recruited by patients only
   - Controls
   - Patients
   - Expt runs

Participants

- 8 female relapsing-remitting MS patients
- 8 female healthy age-matched controls
- Average age: 38 years; Average disease duration: 7 years

Spatial WM Task: Trial Structure

Results: Behavioral Performance

- Spatial WM Task: Trial Structure
- Task Repetition: Scan Session Structure
- S = spatial ("location") trials & control trials
- O = object ("identity") trials & control trials

Results: Overall Activity Differences MS vs. Control

- Analysis used to test for overall difference between groups (traditional group analysis):
  - ANOVA Factors: Group (Patient, Control); Repetition Run (2, 4, 6)
  - Post-hoc contrast: Within-group linear trends

Results: Greater activity across all runs

- Overall differences between groups (traditional group analysis):
  - Spatial WM Task: Trial Structure

Results: Regions Showing Linear Trends for MS Patients or Controls

- Analysis used to test for changes in activity occurring with task repetition:
  - ANOVA Factors: Group (Patient, Control); Repetition Run (2, 4, 6)

Summary

- Task repetition effects reveal three distinct mechanisms of altered brain activation in MS patients:
  1. Failure to improve neural efficiency with short-term task training.
  2. Short-term compensatory processes, developing during task repetition.
  3. Compensatory activation, developed either from long-term changes that occurred before scanning session or from immediate and sustained additional recruitment.

Conclusions

- MS patients show sustained activity while controls show task-related decreases.
- R superior parietal lobe: MS patients show increasing activity while controls show no task-related modulation.
- L superior frontal gyrus: MS patients show greater activity across all runs while controls show no task-related modulation.

References


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