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Review



## Advancements in Overcoming the Blood-Brain Barrier for Drug Delivery

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	<b>Abstract</b>
Published on: 18 Sep 2024	<p>The blood-brain barrier (BBB) presents a significant challenge for the delivery of therapeutic agents to the central nervous system (CNS), effectively protecting the brain from toxins and pathogens while also restricting the entry of potentially beneficial drugs. Recent advances in nanomedicine and drug delivery systems have provided new strategies to bypass or penetrate the BBB, enhancing the treatment of CNS disorders such as brain tumors, Alzheimer's disease, and Parkinson's disease. This review explores the physiology of the BBB, the structural components that contribute to its selective permeability, and the various physiological functions it serves. We discuss the challenges associated with BBB drug delivery and detail several innovative strategies, including receptor-mediated transcytosis, carrier-mediated transport, and nanoparticle-based drug delivery systems. Additionally, the manuscript reviews the in vitro and in vivo models used to evaluate BBB permeability and highlights the latest advancements in enhancing drug delivery to the brain through chemical and physical disruption methods. We provide a comprehensive overview of opportunities for drug delivery across the BBB, focusing on the design of BBB-penetrating molecules and modulation of BBB tight junctions. Finally, this paper examines future directions in BBB research, emphasizing the development of more selective and efficient delivery systems that improve the safety, efficacy, and specificity of CNS-targeted therapies.</p>
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## INTRODUCTION

The blood-brain barrier (BBB) is a highly selective and dynamic barrier that separates the circulating blood from the brain extracellular fluid in the central nervous system (CNS). It plays a crucial role in maintaining brain homeostasis by regulating the entry of substances from the bloodstream into the brain. The BBB is formed by brain microvascular endothelial cells (BMECs), which are closely linked by tight junctions (TJs) that restrict paracellular transport [1]. While the BBB effectively protects the brain from pathogens, toxins, and fluctuations in plasma composition, it also presents a significant obstacle to the delivery of therapeutic agents, particularly

large and hydrophilic molecules, to the CNS. The development of drug delivery systems that can effectively cross or bypass the BBB has been a major focus of research in the treatment of various CNS disorders, including brain tumors, neurodegenerative diseases, and psychiatric conditions [2].

Recent advances in nanotechnology have provided novel strategies to enhance drug delivery to the brain. Nanoparticles (NPs) have emerged as promising carriers for CNS drug delivery due to their ability to be engineered for specific targeting, controlled release, and improved bioavailability. Active targeting approaches, such as receptor-mediated transcytosis (RMT) and carrier-mediated transport (CMT), exploit specific receptors and transporters expressed on the BBB to facilitate drug delivery. Additionally, methods to transiently disrupt the BBB, such as focused ultrasound (FU), chemical disruption, and radiotherapy, have shown potential in enhancing the permeability of the BBB to therapeutic agents [3].

This review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current understanding of the BBB, the challenges associated with drug delivery to the brain, and the recent advancements in drug delivery strategies and technologies designed to overcome these challenges. We will explore the structural and physiological aspects of the BBB, various drug delivery strategies, and the opportunities and future directions in brain-targeted drug delivery research.

## **Blood-Brain Barrier Physiology**

### **Structural Components of BBB**

The blood-brain barrier (BBB) is a complex, multicellular interface that separates the brain's microenvironment from the systemic circulation, maintaining the CNS's integrity and homeostasis. It is primarily composed of brain microvascular endothelial cells (BMECs), pericytes, astrocytes, and a basement membrane, all of which contribute to the barrier's selective permeability and protective functions [4].

### **Endothelial Cells**

BMECs form the core structural component of the BBB and differ significantly from endothelial cells found in peripheral capillaries. These cells are characterized by a high number of mitochondria, limited vesicular transport, and the presence of tight junctions (TJs) that limit paracellular diffusion [5]. TJs are composed of transmembrane proteins, such as claudins, occludin, and junctional adhesion molecules (JAMs), that interact with cytoplasmic accessory proteins to anchor the junctions to the actin cytoskeleton, providing a dynamic yet restrictive barrier to substances [6].

### **Pericytes**

Pericytes are contractile cells that encase the endothelial cells of capillaries and venules and play a critical role in BBB maintenance and function. They regulate endothelial cell proliferation, BBB permeability, and blood flow, and contribute to the formation and stability of TJs [7]. Pericytes interact with BMECs via direct contact and paracrine signaling, which is essential for maintaining the integrity of the BBB [8]. Studies have shown that pericyte deficiency can lead to increased BBB permeability and a decrease in TJ protein expression, highlighting their importance in BBB integrity [9].

### **Astrocytes**

Astrocytes are star-shaped glial cells that provide metabolic support to neurons and secrete factors that promote the BBB phenotype in BMECs. Astrocytic end-feet cover more than 99% of the BBB surface area, providing structural support and releasing signaling molecules like Sonic hedgehog (Shh), vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF), and angiopoietins, which are crucial for BBB integrity and function [10]. They also contribute to the regulation of blood flow and neurotransmitter clearance, further supporting the BBB's protective role [11].

### **Microglia in BBB**

Microglia, the resident immune cells of the CNS, are involved in the immune surveillance of the brain and respond to injury or disease by adopting different activation states. They can influence BBB integrity through the release of inflammatory cytokines, reactive oxygen species (ROS), and other signaling molecules [12]. Microglial activation has been associated with increased BBB permeability, particularly under pathological conditions such as neuroinflammation and neurodegeneration [13].

### **Basement Membrane**

The basement membrane is an extracellular matrix (ECM) structure that provides physical support to the BBB. It consists of two layers: the endothelial basement membrane and the parenchymal basement membrane, which are composed of collagen, laminin, fibronectin, and other ECM proteins [14]. The basement membrane acts as a barrier to the passage of large molecules and cells and plays a role in cell signaling, influencing the behavior of BMECs, pericytes, and astrocytes [15].

**Blood-CSF Barrier at the Choroid Plexus**

The blood-cerebrospinal fluid barrier (BCSFB) at the choroid plexus is another critical barrier in the CNS, which regulates the exchange of substances between the blood and cerebrospinal fluid (CSF). The BCSFB is formed by a layer of epithelial cells connected by TJs, which restrict the paracellular movement of solutes [16]. Unlike the BBB, the choroid plexus epithelial cells are fenestrated, allowing selective transport of molecules between the blood and CSF [17].

**Circumventricular Organ Barrier**

Circumventricular organs (CVOs) are specialized brain regions where the BBB is either absent or more permeable, allowing for the detection of blood-borne signals and the secretion of neurohormones into the bloodstream. CVOs, such as the area postrema, median eminence, and pineal gland, have fenestrated capillaries and are involved in homeostatic functions, including osmoregulation and energy balance [18].

**Physiological Functions of BBB****Maintenance of Ionic and Nutrition Homeostasis**

The BBB maintains the ionic composition of the brain interstitial fluid, which is crucial for neuronal excitability and synaptic transmission. This homeostasis is achieved through various ion channels and transporters expressed on BMECs, which regulate the movement of ions like potassium, calcium, and magnesium [19]. Additionally, the BBB ensures a constant supply of glucose and other nutrients to the brain through specific transport mechanisms, such as glucose transporter 1 (GLUT1) [20].

**Regulation of Neurotransmitter Levels**

The BBB plays a vital role in regulating neurotransmitter levels within the brain. It restricts the entry of peripheral neurotransmitters and neuroactive substances and facilitates the efflux of brain-derived metabolites back into the blood, thereby maintaining neurotransmitter homeostasis [21]. Specific transporters for neurotransmitters like glutamate and dopamine help prevent excitotoxicity and maintain synaptic function [22].

**Inhibition of Leakage of Plasma Proteins into the Brain**

The BBB prevents the leakage of plasma proteins into the brain parenchyma, which could otherwise disrupt neuronal function and trigger inflammatory responses. Tight junctions and the basement membrane work together to restrict the passage of large molecules, such as albumin and immunoglobulins, thereby protecting the brain's microenvironment [23].

**Protection of the Brain Against Neurotoxins**

The BBB serves as a critical defense against neurotoxins, both endogenous and exogenous, by expressing various efflux transporters such as P-glycoprotein (P-gp) and multidrug resistance-associated proteins (MRPs) [24]. These transporters actively pump out toxins and metabolic waste products, preventing their accumulation within the brain and protecting neurons from potential damage [25].

**BBB Permeation Regulation****Tight Junctions**

Tight junctions (TJs) are critical components of the BBB that regulate its permeability. TJs consist of several transmembrane proteins, including claudins, occludin, and junctional adhesion molecules (JAMs), which form a continuous belt-like structure around BMECs, restricting the paracellular passage of molecules [26]. The dynamic regulation of TJ proteins is essential for maintaining BBB integrity and function under physiological and pathological conditions [27].

**Signaling Molecules**

Various signaling molecules, including cytokines, growth factors, and hormones, can modulate BBB permeability by influencing the expression and function of TJ proteins and other components of the barrier. For instance, pro-inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-1 (IL-1) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF- $\alpha$ ) have been shown to increase BBB permeability during neuroinflammation [28]. Conversely, factors like VEGF and nitric oxide (NO) can either enhance or disrupt BBB integrity depending on their concentration and context [29].

**Transporters on BBB**

The BBB expresses a wide range of transporters that facilitate the selective transport of essential nutrients and ions while preventing the entry of potentially harmful substances. These transporters include energy-independent proteins, such as GLUT1 for glucose and LAT1 for amino acids, and ATP-binding cassette (ABC)

proteins like P-gp and BCRP, which actively efflux xenobiotics and metabolic waste products out of the brain [30].

### **Energy-Independent Transporter Proteins**

Energy-independent transporter proteins, such as GLUT1 and LAT1, play a crucial role in maintaining brain homeostasis by facilitating the uptake of glucose, amino acids, and other essential nutrients. These transporters operate based on concentration gradients and do not require ATP, making them highly efficient for nutrient transport [31].

### **ATP-Binding Cassette (ABC) Proteins**

ABC proteins, including P-gp, BCRP, and MRPs, are ATP-dependent efflux transporters that actively pump out a wide range of substrates, including drugs, toxins, and metabolic by-products, from the brain back into the bloodstream. These transporters play a vital role in protecting the brain from xenobiotics and maintaining CNS homeostasis [32].

### **BBB Disruption, Disease, Injury, and BTB Inflammation**

Inflammation is a key factor in many CNS diseases and is often associated with increased BBB permeability. The release of pro-inflammatory cytokines, such as IL-6 and TNF- $\alpha$ , can lead to the disruption of TJ integrity and increased paracellular permeability, contributing to the pathogenesis of conditions like multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's disease, and stroke [33].

### **Brain Injury**

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) and other forms of brain injury can result in BBB disruption, allowing the influx of immune cells and neurotoxic substances into the brain parenchyma. The breakdown of the BBB following injury is mediated by various factors, including oxidative stress, inflammatory mediators, and mechanical forces [34].

### **Brain Tumors**

Brain tumors, such as glioblastoma multiforme (GBM), are characterized by abnormal angiogenesis and the formation of a leaky blood-tumor barrier (BTB), which differs from the normal BBB. The BTB allows for increased permeability to macromolecules and therapeutic agents, but its heterogeneous nature poses challenges for effective drug delivery to the tumor site [35].

### **Stroke**

Stroke, particularly ischemic stroke, can lead to BBB disruption due to ischemia-reperfusion injury and subsequent inflammatory responses. The release of matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs) and other proteolytic enzymes contributes to the degradation of TJ proteins and the basement membrane, resulting in increased BBB permeability and edema [36].

## **In Vitro Methods Used for Evaluation of BBB Drug Penetration**

### **In Vitro 2D BBB Model**

In vitro 2D BBB models are widely used to study BBB permeability and drug transport. These models typically consist of BMECs cultured on permeable supports to form a monolayer that mimics the endothelial barrier properties of the BBB. While 2D models are relatively simple and cost-effective, they do not fully replicate the complex 3D architecture and dynamic environment of the in vivo BBB [37].

### **In Vitro 3D BBB Models**

In vitro 3D BBB models have been developed to better mimic the physiological and structural characteristics of the BBB. These models incorporate multiple cell types, including BMECs, astrocytes, and pericytes, in a three-dimensional scaffold, allowing for more accurate representation of cell-cell interactions and the BBB microenvironment. Recent advances in microfluidic technology have enabled the development of "BBB-on-a-chip" models, which provide a dynamic flow environment to further replicate in vivo conditions [38].

### **Dynamic In Vitro (DIV) Model—Microfluidic Vascular Network**

Dynamic in vitro (DIV) models using microfluidic devices have emerged as powerful tools for studying BBB function and drug transport. These models utilize microfluidic channels lined with endothelial cells and co-cultured with pericytes and astrocytes to replicate the shear stress and fluid dynamics of the brain vasculature. The DIV model provides a more physiologically relevant environment compared to static models and allows for real-time monitoring of BBB permeability and drug transport [39].

**Organoid Culture**

Organoid cultures are three-dimensional cell cultures derived from stem cells that can recapitulate the architecture and function of specific organs, including the brain. Brain organoids have been used to study the development and function of the BBB, as well as disease processes and drug responses in a more physiologically relevant context. Organoids offer a unique opportunity to model the complex interactions between different cell types in the brain and the BBB [40].

**Opportunities for Drug Delivery to Cross the BBB****Design of BBB Penetrating Drug Molecules**

Designing drug molecules that can effectively penetrate the BBB requires careful consideration of their physicochemical properties, such as molecular weight, lipophilicity, and hydrogen bonding capacity. Small molecules with high lipophilicity and low molecular weight are generally more likely to cross the BBB via passive diffusion. Strategies to enhance BBB penetration include modifying drug structures to reduce efflux by P-gp and other transporters or designing prodrugs that can be metabolized into active forms within the brain [41].

**Modulation of BBB Tight Junction**

Modulating the tight junctions of the BBB is a strategy to enhance drug delivery by transiently increasing paracellular permeability. Several approaches, including chemical disruption, focused ultrasound (FU), and radiotherapy (RT), have been explored to achieve this goal. These methods aim to selectively disrupt the BBB at the site of interest while minimizing systemic effects and maintaining overall BBB integrity [42].

**Chemical Disruption**

Chemical agents, such as bradykinin and mannitol, have been used to transiently open the BBB by disrupting TJs. These agents increase BBB permeability, allowing for enhanced drug delivery to the brain. However, the use of chemical disruption is limited by potential side effects, such as neurotoxicity and non-specific opening of the BBB [43].

**Focused Ultrasound (FU)**

Focused ultrasound (FU) is a non-invasive technique that uses ultrasound waves to transiently disrupt the BBB in a targeted manner. When combined with microbubbles, FU can enhance BBB permeability at specific locations, allowing for localized drug delivery to the brain. FU has shown promise in preclinical studies for delivering therapeutic agents to brain tumors and other CNS disorders [44].

**Radiotherapy (RT)**

Radiotherapy (RT) has been investigated as a method to increase BBB permeability in the treatment of brain tumors. RT-induced BBB disruption can facilitate the delivery of chemotherapeutic agents to the tumor site. However, the clinical application of RT for BBB modulation is limited by the potential for radiation-induced damage to healthy brain tissue [45].

**Convection-Enhanced Drug Delivery**

Convection-enhanced delivery (CED) is a technique that uses a pressure gradient to infuse therapeutic agents directly into the brain parenchyma, bypassing the BBB. CED allows for high local concentrations of drugs at the target site while minimizing systemic exposure. This approach has been investigated for the delivery of chemotherapeutics, antibodies, and gene therapies to brain tumors and other CNS diseases [46].

**Hyperosmotic Agent**

Hyperosmotic agents, such as mannitol, have been used to transiently disrupt the BBB by shrinking endothelial cells and opening TJs. This method allows for enhanced drug delivery to the brain but is associated with potential risks, such as increased intracranial pressure and neurotoxicity [47].

**Polymer Wafers**

Polymer wafers, such as Gliadel wafers, are biodegradable implants loaded with chemotherapeutic agents that can be placed directly at the tumor site following surgical resection. These wafers release the drug locally over time, bypassing the BBB and achieving high drug concentrations at the target site. However, the clinical benefit of polymer wafers is limited by their invasive nature and potential for local toxicity [48].

**Receptor-Mediated Transcytosis (RMT)**

Receptor-mediated transcytosis (RMT) is a promising strategy for drug delivery across the BBB. This approach involves the use of ligands or antibodies that target specific receptors on the BBB, such as transferrin or

insulin receptors, to facilitate the transport of drug-loaded nanoparticles or biologics into the brain. RMT has shown potential in preclinical studies for delivering therapeutic proteins, peptides, and nucleic acids to the CNS [49].

## CONCLUSION

The development of effective strategies for drug delivery to the brain remains a significant challenge due to the restrictive nature of the blood-brain barrier (BBB). Advances in nanomedicine, molecular biology, and biomedical engineering have provided new tools and techniques to overcome this barrier and enhance the treatment of CNS disorders. Future research should focus on optimizing drug delivery systems for greater specificity and efficacy, minimizing side effects, and exploring novel therapeutic approaches, such as gene editing and RNA interference, for brain-targeted therapies.

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