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Early Sensory Deficits in Alzheimer's Disease: A Review of Potential Integrating Diagnostic Methods

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Abstract

Alzheimer's Disease (AD) is the most common cause of dementia globally, leading to memory loss and cognitive decline. Accumulating studies have uncovered the correlation between sensory impairments and AD, suggesting that changes in sensory functions could be early biomarkers of the disease. Utilizing sensory biomarkers for AD detection offers a privileged approach since sensory tests could be more rapid, portable, earlier, and less invasive compared to traditional clinical diagnostic methods. However, solely relying on sensory deficits from a single sensory system has significant limitations, particularly regarding accuracy, as sensory impairments can vary among individuals and can easily be influenced by other non-AD-related factors such as environment and aging. Therefore, a more holistic and integrating multidimensional approach is necessary for early diagnosis of AD using sensory biomarkers. This review explores changes in the sensory system of AD patients, and the earliest time point of detectable sensory deficits in various AD transgenic mouse models focusing on olfactory, visual, and auditory functions. The aim is to integrate sensory testing combined with other diagnostic methods such as conventional methods and artificial intelligence models to develop a systematic and reliable early detection of AD through sensory systems.

Keywords: Alzheimer's Disease, sensory biomarkers, AD diagnosis, transgenic mouse model, artificial intelligence.

1. Introduction

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder that is the most prevalent cause of dementia globally, accounting for 60-80% of all dementia cases. With about 5 million new cases occurring annually, it is estimated that the number of people with AD and AD-related dementia will increase by more than 3-fold (~131 million) by 2050¹. AD is indeed a significant burden on the burden and public health^{2,3}, as the number of patients is rapidly increasing. Thus, early diagnosis and treatment methods are crucial in addressing this challenge. AD is clinically characterized by a progressive cognition decline and dementia, in addition to the two required pathologies hallmarks, amyloid- β (A β) plaque aggregation and hyperphosphorylated tau tangles⁴. The traditional clinical criteria for AD diagnosis were originally founded upon cognitive assessments, based on the belief that there are no motor, sensory, or coordination deficits early in the disease, and cannot be determined by laboratory tests⁵. However, accumulating clinical evidence indicates that AD may have early symptoms other than cognitive decline. In 2011, the National Institute on Aging and Alzheimer's Association (NIA-AA) created separate diagnostic recommendations for the preclinical, mild cognitive impairment, and dementia stages of Alzheimer's disease, labeled as "research framework"⁶. This proposed AD diagnostic criteria focuses on the diagnosis of AD with biomarkers grouped into amyloid- β deposition, pathologic tau, and neurodegeneration, also known as the AT(N) classification system⁷. Based on the AT(N) system, several methods can be conducted to diagnose AD prior to cognitive symptomatology, including cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) analysis, positron emission tomography (PET), and magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)⁸. Although capable of identifying early changes during the asymptomatic stage, these core clinical criteria are more generally reliable and provide high diagnostic accuracy in most patients for the advanced stages of AD. In early diagnosis, these methods are still premature and have drawbacks such as overdiagnosis, increased cost, and invasiveness of the assessment⁹.

Recently, accumulated evidence revealed that sensory changes, including olfactory, auditory, visual, tactile, and gustatory dysfunction are associated with AD pathological processes, and usually emerge prior to the mild cognitive symptoms¹⁰⁻¹⁵. Thus, the impairment in sensory systems could be potentially used as biomarkers for the early detection and intervention of AD. However, the examination of sensory function alone may not provide sufficient accuracy for the

clinical AD diagnosis, since it can also be caused by various non-AD-related factors, such as neutral aging, environmental factors, and other neurological disorders like Parkinson's disease¹⁶. Thus, integrating comprehensive sensory alteration across the pathological progression could lead to reliable and early detection of AD, and pave the way to establish an early non-invasive AD diagnostic method. Furthermore, sensory deficits may also promote AD pathology, while early interventions and corrections may alleviate cognitive decline and slow down the AD pathological process. Recent studies in both human and animal models revealed that visual impairments, or hearing loss (induced by cochlear ablation in mouse models) are associated with an increased likelihood of developing dementia¹⁷⁻¹⁹. Preventive actions for vision problems, such as eye exams, eyeglasses, and cataract surgery, may reduce the risk for AD and related dementias²⁰. Hearing intervention might also reduce cognitive change over 3 years in populations of older adults at increased risk for cognitive decline²¹. These findings suggest the promise of implementing several early interventions targeting sensory alterations to potentially reduce the risk of AD.

This review aims to collate current research on sensory changes caused by AD in the olfactory, visual, and auditory systems in both patients and transgenic mouse models of AD, exploring their relationship with established AD sensory biomarkers during the AD pathologic process, and outlining a potential integration diagnostic technique for AD identification at early stages.

2. Pathogenesis and Diagnosis of AD

2.1 The pathogenesis of AD

AD is an irreversible, highly complex, and progressive neurodegenerative disease. It was first described in 1907, with neurotic plaques, neurofibrillary tangles, and amyloid angiopathy in the cerebral cortex²². These autopsy characterizations were then become the hallmarks of AD. Over the past several decades, numerous hypotheses have been made for AD pathogenesis. The amyloid cascade hypothesis postulates that neurodegeneration in AD is caused by abnormal accumulation of amyloid beta (A β) plaques in the cerebral cortex²³. A β is cleavage from the amyloid precursor protein (APP), the defective intracellular cleavage of APP is thought to be the predominant cause of plaque formation. The tau theory focuses on the aggregation of intracellular neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) formed by accumulated tau protein in a

hyperphosphorylated state²⁴. The tau hypothesis suggests that the hyperphosphorylation of tau (P-tau) induces the formation of neurofibrillary tangles, which is another hallmark pathology of AD^{25,26}. Calcium dysregulation seems to generate large amounts of tau²⁷. The inflammatory hypothesis is based on the observation that the increased inflammatory markers in AD patients, such as pro-inflammatory cytokines interleukin-1 β , (IL-1 β), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and tumor necrosis factor α (TNF α)²⁸. Increased oxidative stress in the AD brain is characterized by increased lipid peroxidation, increased protein, and DNA oxidation, these data support the oxidative stress hypothesis^{29,30}. Mitochondrial disturbances are also associated with both oxidative stress and AD plaque formation²⁸.

2.2 The diagnosis of AD

In 2011, the National Institute on Aging-Alzheimer's Association (NIA-AA) conceptualized the pathophysiological process of AD in 2 stages, that is preclinical stages and clinical stages based on whether the patients have overt symptoms of dementia and cognitive impairment⁷. The diagnosis of AD in the clinical stage is clear in the guidelines, but the recommendations for preclinical AD which could potentially be decades before the symptoms become noticeable³¹ were not established. Furthermore, accumulated evidence indicates that the neurodegeneration and cognitive decline in AD is a continuous pathophysiological process that should be regarded as a continuum rather than two distinct preclinical and clinical entities^{6,32}. This concept is recognized widely, indicating the importance of early AD diagnosis methods.

In 2011 NIA-AA guidelines, several methods have been established for identifying and assessing the progression of AD in clinical stages (**Figure 1**). These methods can be clustered into two divisions, clinical assessments, and neuroimaging techniques. The clinical assessments of AD rely on patient informant history, mental state examination, thorough physical examination, bedside cognitive testing including mini-mental state examination (MMSE) and Montreal cognitive assessment (MoCA), and some neuropsychologic and psychiatric tests such as memory, attention, language, problem-solving skills, attention³³. AD can be further diagnosed with firm clinical evidence provided by neuroimaging techniques such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and positron emission tomography (PET) scans^{34,35}, or direct biomarker tests including cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) analysis and blood tests^{36,37}. All these traditional methods

have a certain limitation, as these methods always work after the symptoms presented, such as memory loss and cognitive decline. Furthermore, these diagnostic techniques could be invasive procedures, or require radiation exposure, posing a risk of side effects. Also, certain methods need specialized and costly equipment that is less available. Additionally, AD can only be noticed by families 4 years before a firm diagnosis is made, and this delay is often longer and includes misdiagnosis in the variants and early onset groups ³⁸.

3. Early Biomarkers of AD in the Sensory System

In recent years, more and more results have shown that the sensory system can be affected in AD patients. For example, several studies have revealed that olfactory function was profoundly affected by AD in the clinical stages, revealing that the impairment of olfactory function could be a potential biomarker for cognitive impairment and neurodegeneration ³⁹⁻⁴³. Visual manifestations can also be observed in AD patients, with decreased visual acuity, reduced contrast sensitivity, poor color discrimination, and abnormal ocular motor function ⁴⁴. AD also manifests with hearing loss ⁴⁵, even though the causation between hearing loss and dementia remains unknown, evidence shows that the intervein of age-related hearing loss could prevent AD, making hearing loss another high-risk factor for AD ⁴⁶. In this section, we started with a concise summary of the structure composition of different sensory systems, then we aimed to provide an overview of early sensory biomarkers related to AD in preclinical research. Following this, we encapsulated the sensory deficits reported in the symptomatic stage of AD and concluded by describing the discoveries related to sensory impairments in preclinical AD patients.

3.1 Structural overview of sensory pathways

Olfaction is a highly conservative primary sensory system ⁴⁷. Olfactory can be clustered as the peripheral and central system ⁴⁸. Odorants are first received by olfactory sensory neurons (OSNs) located on the olfactory epithelium (OE), where the chemical signals are converted to neuro-electrical signals ⁴⁹. The electrical potentials are then transferred to the mitral cells and tuft cells (M/T) on the surface of the olfactory bulb (OB) via OSNs projection ⁵⁰, and then handover to olfactory cortical areas, including the piriform cortex (PCX), the medial olfactory cortex, and the amygdala ⁵¹.

About half of the neuronal pathway in the brain subserves visual function, light signals are transduced to the neuronal signals via photoreceptors, the cones, and rods which are located on the outer nuclear layer of the retina. It is then passed to the inner nuclear layer, including ⁵², followed by ganglion cells on the last layer. The axon of ganglion cells projects to the brain cortex via the lateral geniculate nucleus, and superior colliculus, and finally reaches the visual cortex.

The auditory system can be divided into two main components, peripheral and central systems, both are essential for normal hearing function. The peripheral auditory system includes external, middle, and inner ears, approximately 70% of hearing loss is caused by various pathologies in the inner ear and auditory nerve ⁵³. A specialized hearing organ in the inner ear, the cochlea, transduces the sound vibrations to neuronal electrical signals, this process is also known as mechanotransduction ⁵⁴. The main sensory cells for mechanotransduction in the cochlea are hair cells. The ion homeostasis of the cochlea and hair cells (e.g. K^+ and Ca^{2+}) is required for normal hearing function and the development of the auditory system ⁵⁵⁻⁵⁸. After mechanotransduction, the spiral ganglion neurons transmit the acoustic information from the cochlea to the central auditory system via the superior olivary complex, lateral lemniscus, inferior colliculus, medial geniculate nucleus, and the auditory cortex ⁵⁹.

3.2 Preclinical research revealed early sensory biomarkers related to AD

AD animal models, primarily rodent models, have provided valuable insights into the disease and contributed to preclinical research. Since rodents do not develop AD, introducing human AD pathogenic genes is essential to model the AD pathology in mice. Thus, mouse models of AD can be generally classified as follows based on what gene is engineered, and each of these models is slightly difference in AD pathophysiology. Here, we briefly summarized the pathogenesis of 5 main AD mouse models, including the APP transgenic model, APP/PS1 transgenic model, 5xFAD transgenic model, Tau transgenic model, and 3xTg mouse model.

Interestingly, numerous studies have also demonstrated that early sensory impairments are present in AD mouse models, highlighting the utility of these AD mouse models for exploring sensory deficits as potential early indicators of AD. The impairment of sensory systems can be assessed through behavioral tests, such as odor discrimination, identification, threshold test ^{60,61}, Morris water maze ^{62,63}, acoustic startle response (ASR), and pre-pulse inhibition (PPI) tests ⁶⁴.

Behavioral tests, however, may suffer from certain limitations such as variability in sensitivity, and environmental factors, and may not always directly correlate to the function being assessed. Electrophysiologic tests of sensory functions provide a non-invasive diagnosis⁶⁵. Here, we highlighted the earliest point at which the cerebral A β deposition, coupled with cognition decline can be detected in each AD mouse model, which is, as previously described, the hallmark for the transition from the pre-clinical to clinical stages of AD (**Table 1**). We also summarized the earliest time points at which sensory impairments manifest, based on the primary research papers we have reviewed, this includes A β /P-tau aggregation in different sensory systems, functional-related behavioral deficits, and electrophysiologic changes within sensory systems including olfactory, auditory, and visual impairment (**Table 2**).

3.2.1 APP transgenic model

APP transgenic models overexpress the mutation of human APP, which is associated with familial AD (FAD), such as the famous Tg2576 mouse model that overexpress Swedish mutation (K670M/N671L)⁶⁶. Tg2576 mice exhibit a large number of failures in the Morris water maze test with visible platforms starting from 6-11 months⁶⁷ and exhibit cognitive decline around 6 months of age⁶⁸. At this age, the soluble A β levels in the brain cortex start to increase⁶⁹. However, the actual cerebral A β plaques can be observed around 6-10 months old, typically by 9-12 months⁷⁰. Another APP transgenic mouse model is TgCRND8. Similar to Tg2576, TgCRND8 mice encode Swedish mutation (K670M/N671L) and Indiana mutations (V717F) APP protein⁷¹. With the extra expression of mutant A β peptides, TgCRND8 shows an earlier onset of AD pathology compared to the Tg2576 model. The A β deposits can be detected as early as 3 months old, accompanied by the early onset of memory and learning impairment⁷¹.

Tg2576 transgenic mice exhibited sensory impairment at the early stage of AD. In the APP transgenic model Tg2576, the soluble human A β is detectable in the OB as early as 2 months old, which is before the deposition in the PCX, entorhinal cortex (EC), or hippocampus^{72,73}. The nonfibrillar A β deposition can be observed within the olfactory bulb (OB) around 3 months of age in Tg2576 mice⁷⁴. Mistargeted OSN connection in Tg2576 mice can be observed at ages from 12 months down to even postnatal day 10⁷⁵. Furthermore, the decline of olfactory function is also revealed by the impairment of odor-related behaviors in Tg2576 mice. 4-month-old Tg2576 mice showed a significant impairment in the olfactory working memory task when more

odors were applied ⁷⁶. 4-month-old Tg2576 mice are also impaired at object placement, an EC-dependent cognitive task ⁷². These results indicate that the A β deposition in the olfactory system is earlier than it is in the brain cortex, and the impairment of olfactory function also emerges much earlier compared to the MCI and neurodegeneration. Tg2576 mice also show changed electrophysiology characters in the olfactory system before the cognitive impairment. 3-month-old Tg2576 mice exhibit hyperactive odor-evoked activity in the PCX, which is shown to be involved in higher-order olfactory functions, and increased OB-PCX functional connectivity ⁷⁷. The hyperactivity can be also seen in both OB and PCX, with significantly increased beta and gamma band power of spontaneous local field potential (LFP) activity ⁷⁷. The single-unit spontaneous activity in PCX shows a trend toward increased baseline firing starting from 3 months of age ⁷⁸. This data reveals a hyperactive activity persisted during the early stage of AD, before converting to a hyporesponsive state ⁷⁷. However, in 18-21-month-old APP knock-in mice (harboring three familial AD mutations from Swedish, Iberian, and Arctic), no significant differences were observed for the olfactory-related mRNA expression ⁷⁹, indicating that the correlation might only be observed at the early stage of AD and could be overlapped by the normal aging process. We discussed the aging factor during AD pathologies in the following section.

The APP transgenic model exhibited visual impairment at the early stage of AD. APP immunoreactivity can be observed as early as the 7.8-month-old Tg2576 mice ganglion cell layer and the inner nuclear layer of the retina ⁸⁰. A β can be detected in the retina of 12-month-old Tg2576 mice ^{81,82}. Tg2576 mice were impaired in visible platform recognition at 9 months of age and increased activity measures as early as 3 months old ⁸³. Other research confirmed that at both 6 and 14 months of age, the Tg2576 mice were not affected using water maze spatial reference memory and T-maze working memory ⁸⁴.

3.2.2 APP/PS1 transgenic model

APP/PS1 is another AD mouse model that harbors a chimeric mouse/human APP (Mo/HuAPP695swe) and a mutant human presenilin 1 (PS1-dE9), both are associated with early-onset AD⁸⁵. Compared to APP transgenic mice, APP/PS1 mice show an early onset of A β plaques and AD pathology. APP/PS1 mice express cerebral A β deposition in APP/PS1 mice can be detected as early as 3 months of age, the significant memory deficits start from 5 months old⁸⁶.

APP/PS1 mice exhibit olfactory deficits but not cognitive impairment at 3-4 months of age, with soluble A β deposition aggregates and morphology changes in granule cells (GCs) and mitral cells (MCs) in OB⁸⁷. At this age, APP/PS1 mice show impaired odor-related behavioral performance in odor sensitivity tests and discrimination tests⁸⁷. APP/PS1 mice also have an altered electrophysiology in the olfactory system at the early stage of AD. MCs exhibit increased spontaneous firing rates as early as 3 months induced by the inhibitory defects of pre-synapses in OB⁸⁸. 3-month-old APP/PS1 mice show altered LFP activity, with a reduced theta band and increased low gamma oscillatory activity that can be detected in OB slices from 3-month-old APP/PS1 mice⁸⁹. Others reported reduced low and high gamma oscillations with or without odor stimulation using the LFP analysis in the anterior piriform cortex (aPCX) from 3-month-old APP/PS1 mice⁹⁰.

A β can be detected in 6 months of age APP/PS1 mice⁸¹. Another report indicates that A β levels in the retina correlate with cerebral levels that can be detected as early as 5 months⁹¹. Substantial color and contrast-mode alternation deficits appear in APP/PS1 mice as early as 8.5 months of age⁹². APP/PS1 mice exhibit altered electroretinogram and optical coherence tomography starting from 3 months, the retinal pathology, with a reduced inner retinal thickness measured by optical coherence tomography (OCT), can be observed as early as 9 months⁹³.

It has been reported that APP/PS1 mice showed an early-onset of hearing loss as early as 2 months old, starting from the high-frequency region, and appears to be whole-frequency range later on, similar to the age-related hearing loss^{94,95}. However, another study has reported that there is no significant change in both ABR and DPOAE thresholds even in 13 months of age APP/PS1 mice. A recent study showed progressive age-related hearing loss in both WT and APP/PS1 mice after sham operation (SO) of cochlear ablation, the ABR thresholds were

compatible at 4, 6, 9, and 12 months of ages between WT and APP/PS1 mice with SO¹⁸. One possible reason for the different outcomes could be that different backgrounds of mice were utilized. C57 mice typically show a faster onset of age-related hearing loss, while CBA/CaJ mice exhibit a longer hearing lifespan due to the *cdh23* mutation⁹⁶. Thus, the difference may be obscured by normal aging, given the inherent age-related hearing loss in some mouse backgrounds. For the auditory-related behavioral test, no significant difference between APP and APP/PS1 mice and wild-type mice at 6 months old⁹⁷. This data is also confirmed using a 7-month-old APP/PS1 mouse model that a non-significant trend of altered ASR but no changes in PPI can be found^{98, 99}. Another report also showed that APP/PS1 mice exhibited normal ASR and PPI at 3 months old, but significantly lower PPI starting from 7 months of age¹⁰⁰. APP protein expression in the auditory cortex can be detected as early as 2 months old, accompanied by decreased auditory-evoked cortical potential (AECP)¹³. These data indicate that hearing loss and reduced auditory cortical response could be early biomarkers for AD in this mouse model.

3.2.3 5xFAD transgenic models

5xFAD mouse model co-express 5 FAD mutations, 3 APP mutations (mutant human APP with Swedish (K670N, M671L), Florida (I716V), and London (V717I) mutations), and 2 PS1 mutation (M146L, L286V) (Oakley et al., 2006). 5xFAD mouse model is designed for the early onset of AD, as it displays strong A β pathologies, with plaques appearing in the brain from 2-4 months of age, resulting in robust synaptic and neuronal loss¹⁰¹. Early cognitive deficits related to the frontal cortex appear at 4 months of age¹⁰².

The odor-related behavioral change can be detected in 3-month-old 5xFAD mice, with¹⁰³. The A β deposition in this model can be seen at 2 months of age¹⁰⁴ and is high in the OSNs located in the olfactory epithelial ectoturbinate and the ventral olfactory bulb glomeruli at 3 months of age¹⁰³. Another report shows that A β is co-localized with synaptic markers on olfactory bulb glomeruli as early as 2-4 months of age, but the olfactory memory is not impaired from 3 to 15 months of age¹⁰⁵. However, other research shows an impaired olfactory function starting from 3 months and can be detected at 6 and 8 months of age^{61,106}. OSNs from 5xFAD mice at 3 months of age show reduced responses to odorant stimulation measured by Ca²⁺ signals¹⁰³.

5xFAD mice show reduced ganglion cell responses to light as early as 6 months of age, with a thicker inner plexiform layer¹⁰⁷. This mouse model exhibits impaired spatial learning in water maze tests starting at 6 months of age¹⁰⁸. The changed full-field ERGs can be observed as early as 3 months of age¹⁰⁸.

In 5xFAD mice, A β deposition and intracellular accumulation can first be found in the primary auditory cortex as early as postnatal day 21 (p21), the extracellular plaques appear later by age p90^{109,110}. The A β accumulation occurs at cortical levels and the upper auditory brainstem as early as 3 months of age, but at lower levels of the brainstem such as the cochlear nucleus⁹⁹. Using ASR and PPI test, 5xFAD mice exhibit an age-related decline in acoustic startle as early as 3 months of age before any hearing loss symptom¹¹¹, but no significant reduction of PPI at 3-4 months of age¹¹². 13-month-old 5xFAD mice have increased auditory brainstem response (ABR) thresholds, indicating an early-onset of hearing loss¹¹¹. 5xFAD mice also exhibit gap detection deficits in startle response tests as early as 2 months of age¹¹³, with degraded gap responses and baseline firing rates in the auditory cortex¹¹⁴. All these results demonstrate early-onset impairments of the central auditory system in 5xFAD mice. However, it has also been reported that at 3 months of age, 5xFAD mice are indistinguishable from the control in central auditory activity and hearing threshold, but at 6 months of age, the central gain was significantly increased (p4:p1) in 5xFAD mice⁹⁹. Overall, 5xFAD mice exhibit delayed ASR, which could be a potential biomarker for early AD diagnosis¹¹⁵.

3.2.4 Tau transgenic model

The tau pathology and synaptic failure correlate with cognitive decline¹¹⁶. Thus, overexpression of incorrect tau protein could also induce AD in mouse models. Tau transgenic model exhibits mutant tau protein, the P301S (PS19) mice model, for example, expressing P301S mutation Tau driven by mouse prion protein promoter (*Prnp*), gives rise to neurofibrillary tangles and neurodegeneration by 9 -12 months of age^{117,118}. Hyperphosphorylated Tau (P-tau) can be detected in the hippocampus and cortex at 6 months of age¹¹⁹. Memory deficits can be identified around 5 months of age in P301S mice¹²⁰. Spatial learning deficits can be observed as early as 4 months of age¹²¹. P301S mice do not typically develop A β plaques since it is designed for tau pathology research. However, it has been reported that the intracerebral injection of A β 1-42

increases tau phosphorylation, cleavage, and aggregation¹²². Co-expression of soluble A β (A β 4-42) in the P301S tau transgenic model worsens spatial memory deficits and motor performance¹²³. These data demonstrate that A β promotes tau pathogenesis.

Tau transgenic mice (P301S) show increased P-tau expression levels in the OB and PCX as early as 1 month of age, the MC layer is severely affected¹²⁴. A progressive neuronal cell loss in OB and PCX can be observed during aging¹²⁵. The olfactory impairment starts as early as 2 months of age using the food-seeking test^{61,124}. 3-month-old P301S mice show a reduction in gamma frequency oscillation and severe early impairments in the theta-gamma phase-amplitude coupling in the OB area, but the LFP oscillatory activities do not show any difference in EC¹²⁶.

Hyperphosphorylated tau starts to accumulate in the nerve fiber layer in the P301S mouse model at 2 months of age, and aggregates into filamentous inclusions in retinal ganglion cells¹²⁷. P301S mice show a worse learning curve compared to wild-type mice at 2.5 months of age¹²⁰. Another study reports early and persistent spatial working memory deficits, with hyperactivity in the Y-maze test with less alternation, and this trend can be seen as early as 2 months of age¹²⁸.

P301S mice express phosphorylated tau in the auditory cortex, amygdaloid nucleus, and ventral hippocampus as early as 4 months of age, with the enhancement of the PPI test¹¹⁹. Other studies show that P301L mice exhibit unaltered ASR but reduced PPI (or increased %PPI) at 3 months of age^{119,129}. Whether the tau pathway affects auditory electrophysiology needs further investigation.

Overall, in four commonly utilized AD mouse models, a consistent pattern can be observed that sensory system impairments were detectable earlier than the cerebral A β deposition and cognitive decline (**Table 1-2**). Furthermore, most of these models exhibited multiple sensory deficits at the early stage of AD, suggesting the possibility of using an integrated assessment of sensory system impairments as a non-invasive diagnostic tool.

3.3 Sensory deficits and aging in the symptomatic stage of AD

Transitioning from the exploration of sensory deficits in the research animal models to the symptomatic stage marks a critical juncture in understanding the disease's progression. During the pre-clinical phase, subtle sensory changes may begin to emerge, often unnoticed or dismissed as benign age-related decline. However, as AD advances to its symptomatic stage, these sensory impairments become more pronounced, directly impacting patients' quality of life and their ability to interact with the world around them (**Table 3**).

A variety of ocular abnormalities have been observed in AD patients in the MCI stage, indicating a strong association between AD and visual impairment¹³⁰. In the clinical stage, a large number of visual disorders and their association with A β burden have been reported in AD patients¹³¹, such as lower visual acuity in recognition of low luminance and low spatial frequency pictures¹³², reduced visual contrast sensitivity¹³³, altered color vision¹³⁴, retinal hemodynamic parameters¹³⁵, visual field loss¹³⁶, and poor ocular motor function¹³⁷. A deteriorated olfactory function can be observed in AD patients¹³⁸. Furthermore, olfactory dysfunction is associated with A β burden, several studies have reported early olfactory impairment in AD patients also known as hyposmia¹³⁹, these patients exhibit a reduced ability to detect, discriminate, and identify odors, coupled with abnormal odor coding^{140,141}. As many as 60% of older adults with AD and ADRD have hearing loss¹⁴². All these sensory impairments could be used to evaluate the AD pathophysiology and should be taken into consideration for the AD clinical diagnosis. Multiple epidemiological studies have revealed that hearing loss is correlated with pathological cognitive decline and dementia^{59,143}. Hearing loss is a risk factor for cognition impairment. It has been reported that mild to severe hearing loss significantly increases the dementia risk^{144,145}. Elderly individuals with hearing loss symptoms have a higher risk of AD, which is also associated with loss of brainstem and cerebellar volume¹⁴⁶. Furthermore, AD could cause a faster onset of hearing loss. Individuals' AD risks can be evaluated using a polygenic risk score (PRS)¹⁴⁷, high PRS individuals are more likely to experience hearing difficulty than those with lower PRS¹⁴⁸. However, the causation between AD and hearing loss is still controversial. Several hypotheses might explain the relationship between AD and hearing loss. Firstly, hearing loss could cause cognitive decline, and eventually dementia. Indeed, hearing loss induced by noise exposure exacerbates cognitive decline¹⁴⁹, expressing A β derivatives in the cochlear hair

cells leads to an early onset of hearing loss, especially in high-frequency regions, similar to age-related hearing loss ¹¹¹. Overexpression of tau synergistically worsens the A β -induced hearing defects ¹¹¹. These data indicate that A β and tau are both toxic to the peripheral auditory system, and overexpression of A β might accelerate the process of age-related hearing loss. Furthermore, hearing loss leads to less engagement in social and leisure activities which results in dementia. Lastly, both hearing loss and cognitive decline could be caused by a ‘common factor’ ¹⁵⁰, and might share the same pathway with age-related hearing loss, or presbycusis ¹⁵¹. Despite the unclear causation between AD and auditory impairment, it has been reported that inducing gamma oscillations in the auditory cortex improved spatial and recognition memory and reduced A β in AC ¹⁵², indicating the auditory pathway could be a potential target to ameliorate AD-associated pathology.

Noticeably, all the sensory impairments mentioned above could also be the comorbidities of the natural aging process ¹⁵³. This confluence of sensory impairments with aging complicates the differential diagnosis of AD from normal age-related changes, necessitating a nuanced understanding of pathological versus physiological decline. Moreover, the overlap of sensory impairments with AD is not uniquely induced by the aging process but could also be induced by other neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson's Disease (PD) and Dementia with Lewy Bodies (DLB) ^{154,155}. Critical to advancing this differentiation is the longitudinal study of sensory deficits, utilizing both animal models and human subjects, to delineate the specific markers of AD-related sensory degradation. The challenge remains to disentangle the intricate web of aging and disease-specific sensory changes, requiring innovative methodologies and interdisciplinary approaches. Integrating multi-sensory assessments with cognitive evaluations and biomarker analysis could enhance the specificity of early AD diagnoses. Ultimately, this comprehensive approach will not only improve our understanding of AD progression but also pave the way for the development of targeted interventions to mitigate sensory deficits and improve the quality of life for individuals with AD.

3.4 Sensory impairments in preclinical AD patients

The impairment of the sensory system in AD patients may occur in the preclinical stage, well before the emergence of the onset of clinical symptoms (**Figure 1**). Olfactory dysfunction is associated with a higher A β burden in older people, early olfactory impairment in AD patients also known as hyposmia¹³⁹, patients exhibit a reduced ability to detect, discriminate, and identify odors, coupled with abnormal odor coding^{140,141}, elucidating the potential contribution of olfactory testing to detect preclinical AD¹⁵⁶. In clinically normal elderly individuals, worse olfactory function was associated with decreased hippocampal volume, thinner entorhinal cortex, and a trend associated with greater A β burden¹⁵⁵. Another study showed that reduced odor identification (OI) was associated with lower cognitive score and older age, and increased CSF tau and A β , revealing that OI could be an affordable biomarker of AD pathology¹⁵⁷. The visual deficit is considered a high-risk factor for AD and is increasingly supported by evidence linking visual system alterations to the early stage of AD¹⁵⁸. For the preclinical stage, substantial visual deficits have been reported in AD patients,^{44,159}. Potential measurable functional, structural, metabolic, and vascular changes have been identified in the retina during the early stages of AD¹⁶⁰, indicating vision could be another biomarker for early detection of AD. As another high-risk factor of AD, hearing loss was also associated with higher A β and tau burden. A study indicated that worsened hearing was related to the increased A β and tau burden¹⁶¹.

Above all, the evidence supporting sensory deficits as early indicators of AD suggests a paradigm shift in the approach to diagnosing and managing this complex condition in the pre-clinical stages.

4. Integrating Sensory Detection in Early AD Diagnosis

4.1 The Imperative of Incorporating Sensory Detection

In our comprehensive review of early changes in various AD mouse models, notable early alternations take place in sensory systems prior to the cognition decline and the cerebral A β /P-tau aggregation. Here we listed out the early time point of alternation in different sensory systems using different AD mouse models (**Table 2**). This trend is consistent in olfactory, visual, and auditory systems across different AD models. Further, we also found a trend of hyperactivity status across sensory systems before the onset of neurodegeneration and cognition decline. The

soluble A β oligomers induced hyperactivity on memory performance, cell death, epileptiform activity, gamma oscillations, and slow wave activity can be observed in both AD mouse models and human patients ¹⁶², consistent with early detection of soluble A β in sensory organs. The hyperactivity status of sensory functions, also known as network hyperexcitability ¹⁶³, could be a biomarker for AD.

However, we also found results may vary in different research due to the diversity of methodologies and sensory systems. Indeed, some tests have certain limitations. For example, the behavioral test can be affected easily by handling and environmental factors and can be stressful for animals ^{164,165}. Additionally, the accurate measurement and diagnosis of AD using sensory deficits may be complicated by other variables, including natural aging processes, Parkinson's Disease (PD), Dementia with Lewy Bodies (DLB), and various other neurodegenerative conditions, which can introduce significant variability into the assessment of sensory impairments. The variability and uncertainty indicate the necessity of integrating sensory function tests and the combination of sensory tests and other test methods to increase the accuracy of early AD diagnosis. To achieve this, multidisciplinary approaches that incorporate neuropsychological, neurobiological, and genetic analyses are essential. Implementing these strategies will improve the accuracy of early AD diagnosis through sensory deficit detection and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the disease's pathophysiology. For instance, the combination of vision and hearing deficits in older people experience higher rates of cognitive impairment ¹⁶⁶. Thus, the simultaneous application of visual and auditory assessments could potentially enhance the precision of pre-clinical AD diagnosis, offering a more robust framework for identifying early indicators of cognitive impairment. Above all, sensory tests have demonstrated potential as supplementary tools for the diagnosis of AD and MCI. For instance, odor identification screening (Sniffin' Sticks Odor Identification Test, SS-OIT) can improve the diagnostic accuracy of AD and MCI when combined with MoCA, providing additional information for clinical categorization of AD and MCI ¹⁶⁷. Visuospatial measures show a significant diagnostic and prognostic potential in dementia, which means visuospatial tests could also improve the diagnosis of AD ¹⁶⁸. Central auditory testing might be another suitable biomarker for identifying people at risk for dementia combined with electrophysiologic testing ¹⁶⁹.

Nevertheless, before these approaches can be adopted clinically, extensive validation steps are essential. This encompasses replicating findings across diverse studies to ensure reproducibility, alongside rigorous comparisons with established diagnostic benchmarks to clinical implementation. Additionally, defining precise diagnostic thresholds for sensory tests is crucial to delineate AD-related sensory impairments from those attributable to other causes. Moreover, evaluating the predictive value of these tests in foreseeing disease progression is essential. The pathway towards clinical adoption involves meticulous steps, including the elaboration of a clear context of use, submission of a comprehensive qualification package to regulatory bodies, and achieving a consensus on standards for test performance ¹⁷⁰⁻¹⁷³. These processes are instrumental in ensuring the reliability, efficacy, and clinical relevance of sensory detection methods, thereby facilitating the integration into the diagnostic repertoire for early AD.

4.2 integrating Sensory Change Detection with Artificial Intelligence

Utilizing artificial intelligence (AI) in predicting AD is a rapidly evolving field. AI aids early detection and diagnosis based on a variety of machine learning-trained models. Based on the cognitive tests, imaging techniques, and CSF test, AI can improve the accuracy of traditional diagnostic methods, such as analyzing PET and MRI scan images ²⁸, and new biomarkers analysis beside A β 42 and P-tau using the CSF database ¹⁷⁴. AI can also do end-to-end detection without using additional diagnostic methods. A pre-trained data2vec model can perform a self-supervised algorithm that works for speech, vision, and text ¹⁷⁵. An integrating pre-trained model that can access multimodal sensory test data would be a potential method for rapid, non-invasive AD diagnosis during the early detection window (**Figure 2**).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have thoroughly reviewed the changes in multiple sensory systems in the early stage of AD, focusing on olfactory, visual, and auditory functions. Changes in these sensory systems manifest significantly in both AD patients and various AD mouse models, the alternations of the sensory system appear much earlier than the typical neurodegeneration and cognitive decline. These results shed light on the importance of multiple sensory tests for early and non-invasive AD diagnosis. Moreover, the potential integration of multi-sensory examination and the combination with traditional diagnostic methods and/or AI prediction presents a promising methodology for the improvement of accuracy and rapid AD detection in the future.

Traditional diagnostic methods

Clinical assessments

Patient informant history
Mental state examination
Physical examination

Bedside cognitive testing

MMSE
MoCA

Neuropsychologic and psychiatric test

Early biomarkers in sensory systems

Olfactory dysfunction

Hyposmia
Reduced odor identification
Abnormal odor coding

Visual deficit

Decreased visual function

Hearing loss

Figure 1. Overview of traditional diagnostic methods and early biomarkers in sensory systems.

MMSE: Mini-mental State Examination. MoCA: Montreal Cognitive Assessment.

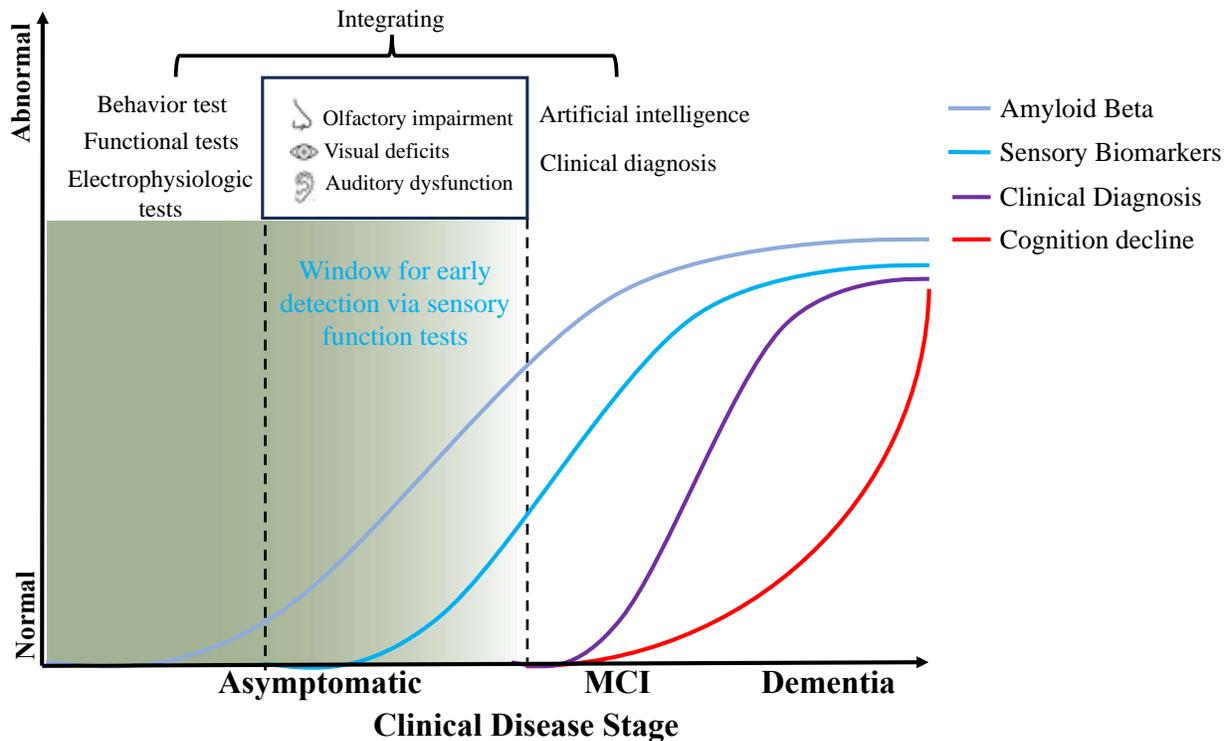


Figure 2: Schematic of Alzheimer’s Disease (AD) Stages. Amyloid beta ($A\beta$) begins to accumulate many years before cognitive decline, marking the asymptomatic stage. This accumulation of $A\beta$ starts to impair the sensory system’s function, including olfactory, visual, and auditory systems, before the onset of Mild Cognitive Impairment (MCI). After the asymptomatic stage, some clinical diagnostic methods become applicable. However, by this point, patients start to experience cognitive decline, which, at this stage, is irreversible. Therefore, the window for early detection through sensory function tests is crucial. Integrating these tests with common clinical diagnostics and artificial intelligence (AI) could enhance the accuracy of early AD diagnosis before the onset of cognitive decline.

Table 1 Earliest Detection Points of symptoms in AD mouse models

AD model mice	Cerebral Aβ/P-tau	Cognition decline
APP transgenic models (Tg2576)	6 Mo ⁷⁰	6 Mo ⁶⁸
APP/PS1	3 Mo ⁸⁶	5 Mo ⁸⁶
5xFAD	2 Mo ¹⁰¹	4 Mo ¹⁰²
Tau transgenic models (P301S)	6 Mo ¹¹⁹	4 Mo ¹²¹

Mo: month of age

Table 2 Earliest Detection Points of sensory deficits in AD mouse models

Mo: month of age, N.A: not applicable.

AD model mice	Olfactory			Visual			Auditory		
	APP/A β/P-tau aggregation	Beha viors	EP	APP/A β/P-tau aggregation	Beha viors	EP	APP/A β/P-tau aggregation	Beha viors	EP
APP transgenic models (Tg2576)	2 Mo ⁷²	4 Mo ⁷⁶	3 Mo ⁷⁷	7.8 Mo ⁸⁰	9 Mo ⁸³	N.A	N.A	N.A	N.A
APP/PS1	3 Mo ¹⁷⁶	3 Mo ¹⁷⁷	3 Mo ⁹⁰	5 Mo ⁹¹	8.5 Mo ⁹²	3 Mo ⁹³	2 Mo ⁹⁴	7 Mo ¹⁰⁰	2 Mo ¹³
5xFAD	2 Mo ¹⁰⁵	3 Mo ¹⁰³	3 Mo ¹⁰⁶	6 Mo ¹⁰⁷	6 Mo ¹⁰⁸	3 Mo ¹⁰⁸	1 Mo ¹⁰⁹	2 Mo ¹¹³	6 Mo ⁹⁹
Tau transgenic models (P301S)	1 Mo ¹²⁴	2 Mo ¹²⁴	3 Mo ¹²⁶	2 Mo ¹²⁷	2.5 Mo ¹²⁰	N.A	4 Mo ¹¹⁹	3 Mo ¹²⁹	N.A

Table 3 Sensory deficits in the symptomatic stage of AD

Sensory system	Sensory deficits	Reference
Vision	Difficulty reading, loss of contrast sensitivity	Lee et al., ¹⁷⁸
Vision	Decreased visual field and/or contrast sensitivity, and fixation problems	Ikram et al., ¹⁷⁹
Vision	Changed topological organization of higher-level visual	Deng et al., ¹⁸⁰
Vision	Loss of retinal ganglion cells	Kirby et al., ¹⁸¹
Olfactory	Increased olfactory threshold	Serby et al., ^{41,182}
Olfactory	Smaller OB volumes	Jobin et al., ¹⁸³
Olfactory	Impaired olfactory identification	Vyhnalek et al., ¹³⁹
Hearing	Cannot recognize or misinterpret environmental sounds	Dietz et al., ¹⁸⁴
Hearing	Changes N200 and P300 latencies	Cintra et al., ¹⁸⁵

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