

Review

Neurobiological mechanisms for the regulation of mammalian sleep–wake behavior: Reinterpretation of historical evidence and inclusion of contemporary cellular and molecular evidence

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Abstract

At its most basic level, the function of mammalian sleep can be described as a restorative process of the brain and body; recently, however, progressive research has revealed a host of vital functions to which sleep is essential. Although many excellent reviews on sleep behavior have been published, none have incorporated contemporary studies examining the molecular mechanisms that govern the various stages of sleep. Utilizing a holistic approach, this review is focused on the basic mechanisms involved in the transition from wakefulness, initiation of sleep and the subsequent generation of slow-wave sleep and rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. Additionally, using recent molecular studies and experimental evidence that provides a direct link to sleep as a behavior, we have developed a new model, the cellular–molecular–network model, explaining the mechanisms responsible for regulating REM sleep. By analyzing the fundamental neurobiological mechanisms responsible for the generation and maintenance of sleep–wake behavior in mammals, we intend to provide a broader understanding of our present knowledge in the field of sleep research.

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Contents

1. Introduction	776
2. Historical background on consciousness and identification of sleep stages.	777
3. Physiological characteristics of wake, NREM, and REM sleep	779
4. Regulation of sleep timing	780
5. Wake-promoting systems of the brain	781
5.1. Noradrenergic cells of the LC	782
5.2. Serotonergic cells in the RN	782
5.3. Cholinergic cells in the PPT	783
5.4. Midbrain reticular formation (MRF)	784
5.5. Dopaminergic cells in the SNc and VTA.	784
5.6. Histaminergic cells in the PH.	784
5.7. Hypocretineric cells in the LH	785
5.8. Cholinergic cells in the BF.	785
5.9. Cells in the SCN.	786

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5.10. PFC in the primate and medial PFC (mPFC) in the rodent	786
6. Initiation of sleep	787
6.1. Activity-dependent metabolites homeostatic theory	787
6.2. Sleep-initiating metabolic factors	788
6.2.1. Adenosine	788
6.2.2. Inhibitory amino acids	788
6.2.3. Prostaglandin (PG)	789
6.2.4. Cytokines	789
7. Mechanisms for the generation and maintenance of SWS	790
8. Mechanisms for the generation and maintenance of REM sleep	793
8.1. Historical perspective	793
8.2. CMN model of REM sleep regulation	793
8.3. REM sleep sign-generators	795
8.3.1. Cortical EEG activation generator	795
8.3.2. Muscle atonia generator	795
8.3.3. Rapid eye movements (REMs) generator	796
8.3.4. Hippocampal theta-wave generator	797
8.3.5. Fluctuations in autonomic systems	797
8.3.6. PGO/P-wave generator	798
8.4. Regulation of state-dependent cholinergic tone in the REM sleep sign-generators	798
8.4.1. Neuronal activity patterns of the PPT cholinergic cells	799
8.4.2. Receptor activation-mediated intracellular events within the cholinergic cell compartment of the PPT	799
8.4.3. Relationship between the PPT cholinergic cells and glutamatergic cells in the mPRF	801
8.5. Modulation of monoaminergic tone in the REM sleep sign-generators	802
8.5.1. Serotonergic cells in the RN	802
8.5.2. Noradrenergic cells in the LC	803
8.6. Mechanisms for regulation of noradrenergic and serotonergic REM-off cell activity	804
8.6.1. GABAergic mechanism	804
8.6.2. Pacemaker mechanism	805
8.6.3. Withdrawal of histaminergic and hypocretinergic excitatory tone	805
8.6.4. Presumed REM-off cells in the ventrolateral periaqueductal gray (vIPAG) and lateral pontine tegmentum (LPT)	805
9. Summary	806
Acknowledgments	807
References	807

1. Introduction

Sleep is a highly evolved global behavioral state in the mammalian species. Over the last 50 years, phenomenological and mechanistic aspects of sleep have been studied more carefully and extensively than the waking states. Many philosophers and scientists have behaviorally defined this state in a variety of terms; yet none of those single-state definitions have succeeded in satisfying all aspects of sleep. This failure to define sleep as a single-state lies in the fact that it is not a homogenous state, rather a continuum of a number of mixed states. The different components of this sleep continuum in the mammalian species could broadly be divided into two major states: non-rapid eye movement (NREM) and rapid eye movement (REM). These two states can be identified objectively using behavioral and physiological signs. For the past 50 years, scientists have debated sleep as either an active or passive process of the brain and body. Recent research, however, reveals initiation of NREM sleep is a passive metabolic process of the body and brain but its maintenance is an active process of the brain. Conversely, both initiation and maintenance of REM sleep are active processes of specific neuronal cell

groups that form a network located within the caudal midbrain and pons. Although these two sleep states occur in a relatively predictable manner, this predictability could become highly erratic depending on the existing mental and physical state, time, and surrounding space. Utilizing experimental evidence that provides direct link to sleep as a behavior, the aim of this review is focused on the basic mechanisms involved in the transition from wakefulness, initiation of sleep and the subsequent generation of slow-wave sleep (SWS, the latter part of NREM sleep) and REM sleep. Although, in recent years, a number of excellent reviews have been published, most have focused narrowly on findings that support the reviewer's theory. By doing so, majority of those review articles ignored some of the most important findings of the last 20 years, especially to describe the mechanisms of REM sleep. Using a holistic approach, this review/commentary article incorporates those important findings in relation to existing literature and views of many different "Pundits". During the last 20 years, a number of specific functions of sleep have also been discovered, but detailed discussion of those functional advantages and disadvantages of NREM and REM sleep are beyond the scope of this review.

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