Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Biological Engineering and Medical Science
DOI: 10.54254/2753-8818/2026.37232

Research Progress on Structural and Functional Impairments of the vHipp-mPFC Neural Circuit in CUMS-Induced Depression Rodent Models

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Abstract. Major depressive disorder (MDD) lacks objective neuroimaging biomarkers under DSM-5 and ICD-11 diagnostic criteria, while the ventral hippocampus-medial prefrontal cortex (vHipp-mPFC) circuit dominates reward processing and negative emotion regulation. The NIMH RDoC framework urgently requires circuit-level objective indicators for standardized mental illness assessment. This review systematically synthesizes peer-reviewed literature published between 2020 and 2025 and retrieved from PubMed and PMC, focusing on chronic unpredictable mild stress (CUMS)-induced structural and functional impairments of the vHipp–mPFC circuit. The included studies are organized around four experimental modalities: behavioral phenotyping, ex vivo immunofluorescence synaptic quantification, in vivo resting-state fMRI, and translational psychiatry analysis. Consistent results from existing validated studies confirm that CUMS treatment reduces vHipp-mPFC synaptic density by 28%-35% and lowers resting-state functional connectivity. And the degree of circuit impairment is positively correlated with depressive-like behaviors. This paper further discusses the inherent limitations of rodent CUMS models, defects of fMRI BOLD signals, and prominent translational gaps between preclinical and clinical research. Finally, it proposes a multimodal validation experiment using both male and female mice to address the sex bias and limitations of single-modality detection in existing studies.

Keywords: major depressive disorder, CUMS animal model, vHipp-mPFC neural circuit, resting-state fMRI, translational psychiatry

1. Introduction

MDD is one of the most disabling mental disorders worldwide, affecting over 280 million people globally and imposing a substantial socioeconomic burden. Yet mainstream diagnostic standards DSM-5 and ICD-11 rely entirely on subjective self-reported symptoms without quantifiable neural biomarkers [1]. A systematic review proved that conventional resting-state fMRI cannot independently support clinical depression diagnosis, because BOLD signals are interfered by anesthesia, respiratory rhythm and cerebral blood flow, and there is no unified clinical diagnostic

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DOI: 10.54254/2753-8818/2026.37232

threshold for human patients. Symptom-based diagnosis fails to elucidate the underlying neuropathological mechanisms of depression, thereby severely limiting the development of precision-targeted antidepressant therapies. To overcome the limitations of traditional symptom-based classification, the NIMH launched the RDoC initiative. It abandons single symptom judgment and takes measurable neural circuit, molecular and behavioral indicators as the core evaluation standard of mental disorders [2]. The negative valence system and reward processing dimension in RDoC both regard cortico-limbic emotion regulatory circuits as key research objects, underscoring the need for reliable quantitative biomarkers of vHipp–mPFC circuit integrity under chronic stress. Viral neural tracing and high-resolution preclinical rs-fMRI have verified dense reciprocal glutamatergic projection fibers between vHipp and mPFC, forming a closed-loop circuit controlling stress response and negative emotion elimination [3]. The ventral hippocampus is specifically responsible for encoding fear and helplessness signals and transmits stress information to the mPFC; in turn, the mPFC exerts top-down feedback regulation to stabilize vHipp neuronal excitability. Multiple Peking University MAG lab PMC studies have confirmed that abnormal signal transmission of vHipp-mPFC circuit is the core neuropathological feature of stress-induced depression [4]. Immunofluorescence staining and in vivo imaging technology can realize visual quantification of this circuit structure and function [5]. Repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS) targeting vHipp-mPFC circuit has become a non-invasive physical intervention for drug-resistant MDD. Numerous clinical studies have demonstrated that rTMS can restore impaired vHipp–mPFC functional connectivity and alleviate core depressive symptoms, underscoring the clinical value of this circuit as a therapeutic target [6]. However, the lack of systematic preclinical multi-modal data limits the optimization of TMS stimulation parameters and individualized treatment schemes. This review integrates original articles and systematic reviews related to CUMS and vHipp-mPFC circuit published on PubMed and PMC from 2020 to 2025. All experimental evidence is categorized into three types: behavioral verification, ex vivo tissue staining and in vivo functional imaging. The consistent patterns of CUMS-induced structural and functional impairment within the vHipp–mPFC circuit are summarized, the cross-species translational limitations of rodent models are analyzed, and future research directions aligned with RDoC-based precision psychiatry are proposed. The research provides systematic theoretical support for circuit-targeted TMS antidepressant therapy and depression neural biomarker mining.

2. Methods

Retrieval databases: PubMed, PubMed Central (PMC); publication time range: 2020–2025. Core search terms: CUMS, chronic unpredictable mild stress, depression, depressive-like behavior, ventral hippocampus, medial prefrontal cortex, vHipp-mPFC, resting-state fMRI, synaptic plasticity, microglia, TMS, translational psychiatry. Logical retrieval formula: (CUMS OR chronic unpredictable mild stress) AND depression AND (vHipp OR ventral hippocampus) AND (mPFC OR medial prefrontal cortex). Duplicates, case reports, irrelevant reviews and non-rodent experimental papers were excluded after preliminary screening. Only peer-reviewed original research articles and systematic reviews were included for subsequent analysis.

(1) Behavioral phenotyping: standard CUMS modeling protocols, three classic depression-related behavioral tests, and model limitations.

(2) Ex vivo structural research: Microglia-mediated synaptic pruning, PSD95/Synaptophysin double immunofluorescence quantitative results, limitations of terminal tissue sampling;

(3) In vivo functional imaging research: Changes of vHipp-mPFC functional connectivity under CUMS, correlation between connectivity intensity and depressive severity, and technical defects of

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BOLD signals.

These three categories span macroscopic behavioral phenotypes, microscopic synaptic structures, and in vivo dynamic functions, forming a complete chain of evidence from phenotype to mechanism.

3. Literature of CUMS depression model & behavioral verification

3.1. Standard CUMS modeling protocols in published works

A series of papers published in Brain Research Bulletin confirmed that the 28-day random mild stress paradigm is the most stable CUMS modeling protocol for C57BL/6 mice. This cycle is selected based on its high modeling success rate; shorter cycles easily cause unstable depressive phenotypes, while overly long modeling periods trigger drastic physiological fluctuations in model animals. The 28-day protocol can stably induce anhedonia and behavioral despair [6]. Standard stress intervention items include food/water deprivation, cold water immersion, cage tilting, light-dark reversal, wet bedding, short restraint and tail suspension. Different stress types are randomly replaced every day to avoid animal stress adaptation. Male C57BL/6 mice are the most widely used experimental subjects due to stable stress susceptibility and consistent behavioral test data.

3.2. Three classic behavioral tests to quantify depressive phenotypes

Three standardized behavioral paradigms are adopted by almost all PMC rodent depression studies to quantify depressive-like manifestations:

1. Sucrose Preference Test (SPT): Sucrose preference is calculated as the ratio of sucrose consumption to total liquid consumption. CUMS model mice show significantly reduced sucrose preference, representing loss of reward pleasure response.

2. Forced Swim Test (FST): This test assesses behavioral helplessness. Cumulative immobility time is recorded over a 6-minute session; longer immobility times are indicative of more severe behavioral despair.

3. Tail Suspension Test (TST): This test provides complementary assessment of behavioral despair. Immobility time is positively correlated with FST results, forming mutual verification of depressive indicators.

Pearson correlation analysis in subsequent circuit studies demonstrated that reduced sucrose preference and prolonged immobility time are significantly correlated with the severity of vHipp–mPFC circuit impairment, providing a behavioral foundation for subsequent structural and functional analyses.

CUMS animal models have two obvious inherent defects restricting translational application:

First, CUMS primarily models environmentally induced depression and does not encompass depression subtypes arising from gene mutations, early trauma, hormone disorder and other factors, failing to reproduce the heterogeneous etiology of clinical MDD patients. Second, more than 90% of existing vHipp-mPFC circuit studies only use male mice, ignoring sex differences in stress susceptibility and estrogen regulation of synaptic plasticity [7]. Clinical epidemiological data show that the incidence of depression in women is twice that in men, and the lack of female experimental cohorts leads to incomplete research conclusions of stress circuit mechanisms.

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4. Literature of ex-vivo immunofluorescence synaptic structural detection on vHipp-mPFC circuit

4.1. Core finding from molecular psychiatry 2025 preprint

Chronic stress activates microglia to over-prune excitatory synapses projecting from vHipp to mPFC [8]. Quantitative double-immunofluorescence analysis of PSD-95 (a postsynaptic marker) and synaptophysin (a presynaptic marker) showed that the synaptic fiber density in the* vHipp–mPFC pathway of 28-day chronic unpredictable mild stress (CUMS) mice decreased by 28% to 35% compared with the control group, and the extent of synaptic loss was positively correlated with the duration of modeling and the severity of depressive-like behaviors. Mechanistically, chronic stress increases peripheral glucocorticoid levels, upregulates neuronal CX3CL1 secretion in vHipp, activates the microglial CX3CR1 signaling pathway, and triggers excessive synaptic pruning of projection fibers to mPFC. The decrease of postsynaptic PSD95 protein weakens glutamatergic transmission efficiency between vHipp and mPFC, forming the structural pathological basis of stress-induced depression.

4.2. Standard experimental operation of tissue immunofluorescence detection

All PMC included literature adopting unified ex vivo synaptic quantitative procedures: after behavioral tests, mice receive transcardial perfusion fixation with paraformaldehyde; brain tissue is dissected for coronal sectioning of vHipp and mPFC regions; PSD95 and Synaptophysin primary antibody co-incubation, fluorescent secondary antibody staining and confocal laser scanning imaging are carried out sequentially; ImageJ software is used to quantify synaptic spine density and fluorescence intensity of projection fibers to evaluate circuit structural integrity. This process has become the gold standard for preclinical synaptic morphological detection of cortico-hippocampal circuits.

4.3. Inherent drawbacks of ex vivo terminal tissue staining

Tissue immunofluorescence detection has two irreparable limitations, which can be divided into limitations in the time dimension and detection dimension.

1. Terminal sampling cannot dynamically track progressive circuit damage associated with prolonged stress exposure; rather, all data reflect only the static synaptic state post-modeling and fail to capture the temporal sequence of microglial activation, synaptic loss, and the onset of depressive-like behaviors.
2. Ex vivo isolated tissue cannot record real-time neuronal electrical activity in living animals, only reflecting static synaptic structural changes, and cannot link synaptic density indexes with dynamic functional synchronization of vHipp and mPFC.

5. Literature of in-vivo resting-state fMRI functional connectivity detection

5.1. Consistent functional results from 2023 PMC mouse fMRI review

Resting-state BOLD signal synchronization between vHipp and mPFC reflects circuit functional coupling intensity. After 28 days of CUMS, the resting-state functional connectivity (rsFC) between the vHipp and mPFC in C57BL/6 mice decreased significantly; consequently, signal synchronization between these two emotion-regulating brain regions was impaired, with lower functional

DOI: 10.54254/2753-8818/2026.37232

connectivity corresponding to more severe anhedonia and behavioral despair [9]. Abnormal functional coupling of vHipp-mPFC is the direct functional manifestation of synaptic structural loss: the reduction of excitatory projection fibers weakens synchronous neural oscillation between vHipp and mPFC at the resting state, impairs mPFC top-down negative emotion feedback regulation, and causes the brain to lose the ability to clear stress signals, finally inducing persistent depressive-like behaviors.

5.2. Technical defects of fMRI BOLD signal detection (PMID:35598083)

Resting-state fMRI (rs-fMRI) is a key translational imaging tool connecting animal models with clinical major depressive disorder (MDD) patients; however, it presents notable technical limitations that restrict its utility as a clinical biomarker. These limitations can be divided into unique drawbacks specific to animal experiments and translational obstacles in clinical conversion:

Defects unique to preclinical animal experiments

1. Preclinical mouse fMRI requires inhalation anesthesia, which interferes with spontaneous brain activity and blood flow rhythm, leading to unstable rsFC data and large batch differences between experiments;

Translational defects for clinical human research

2. The BOLD signal indirectly reflects cerebral blood oxygen metabolism rather than real-time neuronal firing activity, and signal changes cannot be directly equated with neural circuit excitability fluctuation.

5.3. Correlation analysis between circuit connectivity and depressive severity

Multiple independent CUMS rs-fMRI studies adopted the Pearson correlation test to analyze the relationship between vHipp-mPFC functional connectivity and behavioral test scores. Unified statistical results showed that the reduction of circuit rsFC value had a significant positive correlation with prolonged immobility time in FST/TST and decreased sucrose preference rate ($P<0.001$). This consistent correlation provides reliable quantitative evidence for taking vHipp-mPFC functional connectivity as an evaluation index of stress depression severity.

6. Literature of translational psychiatry & RDoC framework analysis

6.1. Species gap between rodent and human brains

Systematic reviews published in Translational Psychiatry have highlighted prominent structural and functional differences between rodent and human cerebral cortices, constituting the core translational gap that restricts the translation of CUMS experimental findings into clinical therapies [10]:

1. Structural difference: Rodent mPFC has a simplified layered structure, and the projection density of vHipp to mPFC subregions is completely different from the human ventromedial prefrontal cortex homologous area. Human vmPFC contains area 25 subregion which does not exist in mouse mPFC, and this subregion is closely related to clinical overactive negative emotion in depression.

2. Signal pathway difference: The regulation mode of HPA axis stress hormone mediated by the vHipp-mPFC circuit is inconsistent between mice and humans, and the threshold of circuit damage induced by glucocorticoid stress has an obvious species difference.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-8818/2026.37232

3. Behavioral phenotype difference: Rodent anhedonia and behavioral despair are simplified behavioral indicators, which cannot fully simulate complex clinical depressive symptoms such as self-blame, suicidal ideation and cognitive decline, resulting in limited reference value of animal circuit data for analyzing human disease mechanisms.

6.2. Clinical application of TMS targeting the vHipp-mPFC circuit

Multiple clinical intervention studies confirmed that repetitive TMS with optimized stimulation parameters targeting vHipp-mPFC can reverse weakened functional connectivity and significantly relieve core symptoms of drug-refractory MDD patients, fully verifying that vHipp-mPFC is an effective therapeutic target for depression. Currently, a major bottleneck limiting the optimization of clinical rTMS efficacy is the scarcity of multimodal preclinical CUMS data, which hinders the precise tailoring of stimulation intensity, frequency, and target localization based on the baseline severity of circuit damage in individual patients.

6.3. Matching preclinical circuit indexes to NIMH RDoC research domains

The structural index (vHipp-mPFC synaptic density) and functional index (resting-state functional connectivity) summarized in this review fully meet the core requirements of the RDoC framework for the negative valence system and reward processing dimension: quantifiable, circuit-specific, dynamically changing with disease severity, and detectable through multi-modal experimental technologies. These two categories of indices can serve as candidate neural biomarkers for the standardized RDoC-based evaluation of stress-induced mood disorders, thereby overcoming the limitations of traditional subjective symptom rating scales.

7. Discussion: preliminary design of supplementary verification experiments

In view of the common defects of existing CUMS vHipp-mPFC circuit research, this paper designs a complete multi-modal verification experiment scheme to fill current research gaps.

Experimental subjects: Both male and female C57BL/6 mice are set to compensate for the lack of female cohort data in existing literature. Each sex is divided into a blank control group and a 28-day CUMS model group, n=12 mice per group. The sample size of 12 animals per group was determined based on previous PubMed-indexed preclinical CUMS studies; this sample size is adequate to control for individual biological variability and ensure the statistical reliability of both behavioral and imaging quantification. All experimental procedures strictly followed the 3Rs animal ethics principles. Following modeling, the sucrose preference test (SPT), forced swim test (FST), and tail suspension test (TST) were conducted to screen for successfully validated depressive-like mice.

After behavioral phenotype evaluation, each group of mice receives sequential multi-modal detection to realize joint verification of circuit structure and function:

1. In vivo resting-state fMRI scanning: Collect vHipp-mPFC resting-state functional connectivity data of living mice to record dynamic functional coupling changes;

2. Transcardial perfusion fixation after imaging: Dissect brain tissue for coronal sectioning of vHipp and mPFC;

3. PSD95/Synaptophysin double immunofluorescence staining: Confocal imaging and ImageJ quantitative analysis of vHipp-mPFC projection synaptic fiber density.

Consistent with established findings in PubMed-indexed literature, the CUMS model group is expected to exhibit pathological alterations across three distinct levels compared with the control

DOI: 10.54254/2753-8818/2026.37232

group.

1. Behavioral level: A significant reduction in sucrose preference and prolonged immobility times in the FST and TST, reflecting typical anhedonia and behavioral despair phenotypes;

2. Structural level: vHipp-mPFC excitatory projection synaptic density decreases by 25%–38%, microglial activation and excessive synaptic pruning can be observed under confocal microscope.

3. Functional level: vHipp-mPFC resting-state functional connectivity value is significantly reduced, and circuit functional synchronization is impaired.

Quantitative correlation analysis verifies that the severity of circuit structural and functional damage has a significant positive correlation with depressive behavioral test scores.

8. Conclusion

This systematic review synthesizes research published on PubMed and PMC between 2020 and 2025 concerning the vHipp–mPFC circuit in CUMS-induced depression, yielding three core conclusions:

1. The standardized 28-day CUMS random mild stress paradigm can stably induce classic anhedonia and behavioral despair depressive-like phenotypes in male C57BL/6 mice. SPT, FST and TST are fully verified as standardized quantitative evaluation methods of depressive phenotypes in preclinical circuit research.

2. A large number of ex vivo immunofluorescence staining and in vivo resting-state fMRI imaging literature jointly confirm that chronic unpredictable mild stress causes dual damage of vHipp-mPFC bidirectional emotion regulatory circuit: structural damage is manifested as microglia-mediated excessive pruning of excitatory projection synapses and significant reduction of synaptic fiber density; functional damage is manifested as weakened resting-state BOLD signal synchronization and decreased functional connectivity between vHipp and mPFC. This dual structural-functional circuit impairment is the core neural mechanism of environmental stress-triggered depression.

3. Quantitative correlation studies consistently demonstrate that the severity of vHipp–mPFC circuit structural and functional damage correlates significantly with the magnitude of depressive-like behaviors in CUMS mice, providing a robust quantitative framework for evaluating the severity of stress-induced depression at the circuit level.

Existing preclinical studies investigating vHipp–mPFC circuit impairment in CUMS depression models exhibit notable limitations. Most experimental designs exclude female mouse cohorts, thereby precluding any clarification of the regulatory effects of estrogen on synaptic plasticity and vHipp–mPFC circuit stress susceptibility, and failing to account for clinical sex differences in the incidence of MDD. This paper puts forward two core directions for follow-up translational research of vHipp-mPFC circuit depression under the RDoC framework:

1. Incorporating female mouse cohorts in comparative studies to explore the differential regulatory mechanisms of sex hormones on vHipp–mPFC synaptic plasticity and stress susceptibility, thereby eliminating the sex bias prevalent in existing animal experiments.

2. Introducing optogenetic and chemogenetic circuit specific regulation technology to realize targeted activation or inhibition of the vHipp-mPFC projection pathway, thereby establishing a causal link between circuit integrity and depressive-like behaviors while disentangling correlation from causation in existing experimental observations.

DOI: 10.54254/2753-8818/2026.37232

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