

**Taste Aversion Learning as a Tool for the Study of Hippocampal and Non-Hippocampal Brain Memory Circuits Regulating Diet Selection**

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## **Abstract**

Diet selection is the result of different learning experiences that accumulate throughout the life of the organism. The acquisition of aversions to the taste of food followed by mild or severe visceral negative effects plays an important role in food selection.

Current knowledge on the role of the critical brain areas (parabrachial area, insular cortex and amygdala) involved in the basic associative neural circuit of taste aversion learning is reviewed. In turn, as shown by a variety of learning phenomena, the development of new aversions to the taste of different types of food is profoundly modulated by the memory of previous learning experiences with the same or different tastes. Some of these phenomena may depend on memory brain systems independent of the basic circuit for taste aversion learning. This seems to be the case for contextual effects and conditioned blocking that depend on the hippocampal integrity.

Experimental evidence on the neural basis of complex learning phenomena in taste aversion learning is reviewed. Thus, understanding the way in which taste aversion learning regulates diet selection in daily life requires the study of interactions between hippocampal and non-hippocampal dependent memory systems. Taste aversion learning is proposed as a useful behavioral tool in the investigation of different brain circuits that are critical for food selection.

## 1. Introduction

The amygdala is part of the limbic system, which is critical for survival. In rats, it is located bilaterally in the medial temporal lobes, and its nuclei are similar to those of primates [1, 2]. In mammals, the amygdala is involved in the expression of many behaviours, such as fear responses, reproduction, aggressiveness and social behaviour and also in physiological processes such as modulation of the neuroendocrine and autonomic systems and homeostasis [3]. The amygdala consists of several nuclei that form a complex network of information processing. The three main nuclei of this structure are the medial, the central and the basolateral nucleus. These nuclei have complex connections with other structures; therefore it is thought that the activity of the amygdala is relevant in the modulation of some types of learning and memory [4]. In particular, the amygdala appears to participate in several complex processes underlying taste learning [5-11].

## 2. Amygdala and conditioned taste aversion learning

This section will review the studies that implicate the amygdala in taste learning processes [12]. First, a brief description of the phenomenon of CTA will be provided. Then we will analyse the research that points to the amygdala and its nuclei as part of the brain mechanisms of CTA.

### 2.1. Description of the conditioned taste aversion paradigm

Conditioned taste aversion learning is a particular conditioning paradigm which exists for the subject to associate the consumption of a new taste with a visceral disease that occurs after. Since a delay usually separates the presentation of the taste from the visceral disease, it is suggested that the learning results from the association between the memory trace of that taste and the disease [13]. The CTA learning is vital for numerous species because the learned aversion could reduce the probability of re-experiencing the toxic effects of a harmful substance. Even though this is a conditioning process, it has some special features when compared to most other forms of associative learning. Taste aversion learning is a paradigm widely used in animal research exploring the brain mechanisms of learning and memory [14]. Therefore, we will describe the taste aversion learning paradigm, which was mainly shown in animals. In humans, CTA has also been studied to a much lesser extent than in animals. For example, taste aversion learning has been examined in humans in order to understand the neurobiology of eating behaviour. Studies using positron emission tomography (PET) have shown that the amygdala and orbitofrontal cortex are activated when processing an aversive taste stimuli [15, 16]. Recent research with functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) in humans has confirmed the involvement of the orbitofrontal cortex, anterior cingulate cortex, insular cortex and amygdala in processing highly aversive flavours [17]. Since the amygdala also seems to be involved in conditioned taste aversion in humans, it is possible that the acquisition of this learning requires biological mechanisms that are common in different species of vertebrates [18]. Moreover, because the food aversion associated with chemotherapy treatment is similar to the

experimentally induced taste aversion [19], the CTA paradigm has helped to develop different strategies for dealing with the taste aversion that occurs in patients being treated with chemotherapy [20].

A crucial role in food selection processes is the ability to learn taste aversions [21]. This is particularly relevant for omnivorous species. The discrimination process between edible and harmful, or even potentially deadly, substances starts from the gustatory sensory information. This information stimulates a biological mechanism of precaution against new flavours, which facilitates the evaluation of the consequences of the ingestion of novel substances [22] and subsequently promotes the acquisition of conditioned taste aversions or preferences [8]. The initial response of caution is accompanied by a lower consumption of the novel substances. This phenomenon is called neophobia. If the sensory characteristics of the novel substance are associated with negative visceral consequences (such as poisoning), the animal will then acquire an aversion to that particular taste [23]. If the intake is associated with a positive visceral consequence (as in the case of an energetic food), or non-aversive, the new flavour will be recognized as being safe. Evolution has resulted in the development of neural mechanisms of attention, motivation, learning and memory that allow such identification of edible substances to be made.

Conditioned taste aversion paradigm exhibits three important features of associative learning; each feature exists separately in other classical conditioning paradigms. First, CTA can be acquired with a single pairing between the taste and the visceral discomfort [6, 13, 22-25]. Second, conditioned taste aversion is an example of a biological predisposition to associate certain stimuli more easily. For example, the taste-illness association occurs more easily than sound-disease or odour-disease associations [26]. The third characteristic of CTA learning refers to the delay that separates the presentation of the taste and visceral stimuli, or absence of temporal contiguity. The association between a new taste (the conditioned stimulus -CS-) and visceral consequences following its ingestion (the unconditioned stimulus -US-) results in a subsequent aversion to that taste, even though a delay of minutes or even hours (far superior to that seen in any other type of associative learning) is used. This unusual property of CTA to resist to a long inter-stimulus delay is related to the physiological processes of digestion. Indeed, in physiological conditioning, a delay always separates the ingestion from a potential poisoning. This delay is necessary for the completion of gastric digestion which results in the transport of nutrients through the gastrointestinal system and the gradual absorption of the products of digestion. Consequently, the association between gustatory and visceral stimuli must comply with this temporal requirement [27].

The experimental procedure used to induce conditioned taste aversion is a tool that has been used for decades in research into learning and the biological substrates of learning and memory [6, 11, 13, 14, 24, and 28]. In the laboratory, the procedure involves water deprivation with limited access to a daily amount of water, or water limited to a restricted time period within the day (usually 15 minutes). Once the daily amount of water consumed is stabilized, the animals receive the presentation of a new taste (representing the conditioned stimulus, generally a saccharin solution dissolved in water at 1%) during the conditioning session. The consumption of this taste is followed twenty or thirty minutes later by a gastrointestinal distress (representing the unconditioned stimulus, generally induced by an intraperitoneal injection of lithium chloride (LiCl), although some other aversive agents [29-36] have been used to induce aversion). Forty eight hours after conditioning, CTA tests can be used to detect the strength of the aversion to the CS previously paired with the malaise [37]. The reduction in the consumption of the CS after learning indicates more than a conditioned avoidance response. In fact, the learned aversion to taste really involves a change in the incentive properties of that stimulus, with its hedonic value becoming repulsive [38]. This learning is easily reproduced in the laboratory, and has proven to be a relevant paradigm for discovering important aspects of the neurobiological substrate involved in associative learning and memory. The following section will describe the findings that appear implicate the amygdala in the acquisition of this kind of learning.

## 2.2. Amygdaloid nuclei and acquisition of CTA

Conditioned taste aversion learning depends on a complex neural circuit that includes brainstem areas, as well as subcortical and cortical mechanisms [8, 11, 39, and 40]. Lesion studies have provided important information about the different structures and regions of the brain involved in the acquisition of taste aversion [10, 18, 41, 42-44]. The processing of sensory information necessary for the acquisition of a taste aversion involves multiple systems. The taste system detects information from the lingual papillae and palate via the cranial facial nerve (VII), glossopharyngeal (IX) and vagus (X) [8]. The visceral sensory system receives information via the vagus nerve and area postrema of the brainstem [45]. The information from both sensory systems are transported separately to the primary relay brainstem nuclei (nucleus of the solitary tract) and secondary relay (parabrachial nucleus), as well as to brain structures involved in processing visceral and taste, such as the thalamus, the insular cortex and the amygdala [46]. The processing of taste qualities [47] and subsequent association with the visceral effects of toxicity [48-50] requires complex neuroanatomical relationships in which the amygdala seems to be involved [51].

The amygdala and other cortical and subcortical areas are related to the brainstem associative processes necessary for taste aversion conditioning [41, 52-57]. In reference [52], the blockade of protein synthesis or beta-adrenergic receptors in the central

amygdala blocks acquisition but not extinction of CTA. The same procedure in the basolateral amygdala blocks extinction but not acquisition of this learning. The authors of this research argue that the neural circuit that makes the acquisition of taste aversion memory possible and the extinction of the aversion requires the activity of the amygdala. However, the involvement of the amygdala and other structures in the associative processes of CTA has been studied by examining protein synthesis associated with learning. In one research it has been observed that the long-term aversive taste memory requires protein degradation in the insular cortex and the amygdala [56]. The selective involvement of the amygdala in CTA has also been analysed in other ways in animal models. There are studies of receptor expression during taste aversion learning [58, 59], studies of the c-Fos expression [60] and other genes [61] in the amygdala, studies of receptors blockade of the amygdala [62] and numerous studies using brain lesions [63], all in the CTA paradigm. For example, possible changes of the leptin receptor expression in the basolateral amygdala in relation to CTA acquisition have been analyzed [59]. Leptin receptor mRNA in the brain was analyzed by in situ hybridization and the expression of this receptor was assessed by immunohistochemistry method. Both measures were significantly higher after the formation of CTA. The authors concluded that the amygdaloid leptin receptor is involved in neuronal communication for CTA formation. Other studies [62] have also implicated other amygdaloid receptors in CTA, particularly the noradrenergic receptors. The researchers administered selective bilateral microinfusions of the beta-adrenergic antagonist propranolol into the basolateral amygdala immediately before intraperitoneal LiCl injections. This procedure disrupted CTA memory and the authors proposed that the basolateral amygdala is a critical structure in modulating the consolidation of taste memory. Genetic studies have confirmed the relation between amygdala and CTA. In this regard, studies have recently identified some specific genes in the amygdala (associated with neuropeptides, G protein-coupled receptors, ion channels, kinases and phosphatases) that contribute to CTA acquisition [61].

Regarding the lesion procedure; the studies that describe a lesion in the amygdala have not been decisive so far as they have shown a weak effect on taste learning or even no effect at all. However, electrolytic lesions of amygdala were shown to attenuate or disrupting CTA [64, 65] and also been shown to affect the neophobia phenomenon [65, 66]. Taken together with other studies that reported a selective involvement of the basolateral nucleus in CTA [67], it has been suggested that the effect of the basolateral injury on CTA is due to an alteration of the proper appreciation of the gustatory signal novelty, which could have affected the subsequent expression of taste aversion [63,68]. Subsequent studies have confirmed this hypothesis by reporting a selective effect on CTA [69] or a dual effect on neophobia and taste aversion [70] after basolateral nucleus lesion.

Moreover, electrolytic lesioning of the basolateral nucleus of the amygdala did not induce any effect on the formation of taste aversion in different studies [71-73]. Some authors have argued that the involvement of the basolateral amygdala in CTA is indirectly mediated by its interactions with the nucleus of the solitary tract [74] or the insular cortex [71, 72] therefore showing that the electrolytic lesions indirectly affects the acquisition of taste aversion. Nevertheless, other brain manipulation tools and neurophysiological techniques have also implicated the basolateral nucleus of the amygdala in the acquisition of CTA learning [51, 75-80]. In other studies [51] it has been found that specific neurons in basolateral amygdala respond to convergent taste stimulus and unconditioned stimulus information during CTA. The authors used a procedure of analysis of temporal gene transcription by fluorescence in situ hybridization in order to locate these populations of neurons. In [77], it was shown that CTA memory needs protein synthesis in the basolateral amygdala, and in [79] it has been proposed that the basolateral amygdala interacts with the insular cortex to modulate the memory consolidation because the infusions of the beta-adrenergic antagonist propranolol administered into this nucleus blocked the enhancing effects on CTA of a muscarinic agonist infused into the insular cortex.

The local injection of excitotoxic agents (such as NMDA or ibotenic acid) induces a more selective lesion in the cell bodies of the target structure. Although the excitotoxic lesioning of the amygdala has not always resulted in deterioration of CTA [71, 81, 82], the excitotoxic lesions of the basolateral amygdala often reproduce the effects obtained with electrolytic lesion on CTA [10, 44, 50, 83-86]. In contrast, the excitotoxic lesion of the central amygdala does not affect the formation of taste aversion [44, 83, 84, and 87]. The possible role of the central nucleus of the amygdala in CTA seems to be related to the processing of visceral information. For example, immunohistochemistry has found increased levels of a specific protein kinase associated with the memory of CTA in the cells of the central nucleus of the amygdala after injection of a high dose of LiCl-induced visceral malaise (US) [88]. A local microinjection of an inhibitor of this kinase into this nucleus decreased the strength of the CTA as well as the levels of this protein in the central amygdala. The authors of this study proposed that the intracellular levels of this protein kinase in the central amygdala are critical to process the visceral information in CTA. Therefore, it seems that the amygdaloid nucleus, which is involved in the acquisition of CTA, is the basolateral nucleus. In this regard, an unpublished study conducted in our laboratory has shown that excitotoxic lesions of the basolateral amygdala decreases taste aversion but does not disrupt the learning. In this study we performed bilateral excitotoxic lesions in the basolateral nucleus of the amygdala by local injection of NMDA and compared these animals' learning with two control groups. One was sham-lesioned in the amygdala and one with a lesion in the hippocampus, a structure not involved in CTA. The results showed a learning impairment in the case of animals with a basolateral lesion, compared with both control sham- and hippocampus-lesioned groups (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of taste aversion to saccharin in animals with lesion in the hippocampus (HC) or the basolateral amygdala (BL), as well as in the sham group. The percentage was calculated as a ratio between the saccharin consumed the day of acquisition of learning / saccharin consumed the day of acquisition of learning + saccharin consumed the testing day [X100].

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Figures 2 and 3 show stained brain sections of a sham-lesioned animal and an animal with excitotoxic lesion in the basolateral amygdala induced by local injection of NMDA.

These results suggest that the basolateral amygdala is part of the brain circuitry of CTA, but is not a necessary structure for this learning. In other studies, the inactivation of the basolateral amygdala has not disrupted the CTA [89], or has impaired the learning but did not prevent its acquisition [7]. Therefore, our study, which used excitotoxic lesions, is consistent with the hypothesis that the formation of taste aversion does not require the integrity of the amygdala, although it does seem to be an important structure in the modulation of CTA [41] since the selective lesion of the basolateral amygdala reduces, but does not prevent, the learning. The reversible lesion studies also suggest that the amygdala, or any of its nuclei, is involved in the neural mechanism responsible for CTA learning. For example, the inactivation of the amygdala using local microinfusions of tetrodotoxin (TTX) has confirmed the involvement of this structure in the acquisition and recovery of CTA [7, 90].

In summary, the evidence indicates that the amygdala is part of the neurobiology of taste aversion learning [51, 63, and 91]. Although the exact mechanism is unknown, the data suggest that anatomical and functional relationships between amygdala and insular cortex are necessary for the correct acquisition of conditioned aversion [79, 92]. Research also indicates that the projections from the amygdala to the hypothalamus [93,94] and, in particular, to the brainstem nuclei involved in taste aversion learning [46,74,95-99] also play a significant role in this kind of conditioning.

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