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Efficacy and Safety of tDCS for Major Depressive Disorder: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis of Randomized Trials

Deanna Sotiras*

Department of Rheumatology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

Introduction

Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) is one of the most common and debilitating mental health conditions worldwide, affecting millions of individuals across diverse age groups and cultures. MDD is characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and a lack of interest or pleasure in most activities. It also includes a range of cognitive, emotional, and somatic symptoms, which can severely impair an individual's functioning and quality of life. Despite the availability of various treatments, such as pharmacotherapy and psychotherapy, a significant number of individuals with MDD either fail to respond to these interventions or experience only partial symptom relief. This treatment-resistant depression represents a substantial challenge for clinicians, and there is an urgent need for alternative, effective therapies. Among these, Transcranial Direct Current Stimulation (tDCS) has garnered increasing attention as a potential treatment for MDD, particularly in patients who do not respond to conventional therapies. tDCS is a non-invasive neuromodulation technique that involves the application of low-intensity electrical current to specific areas of the brain via electrodes placed on the scalp. This technique is thought to modulate cortical excitability, potentially leading to therapeutic changes in brain function [1].

Description

The Dorsolateral Prefrontal Cortex (DLPFC) is the most commonly targeted brain region in tDCS for depression, as it is involved in emotion regulation, executive functioning, and cognitive control. Neuroimaging studies have consistently shown reduced activity in the left DLPFC in individuals with depression, and evidence suggests that modulating this region with tDCS can lead to improvements in mood and cognitive function. Despite promising results from smaller studies, the overall efficacy and safety of tDCS for MDD have not been definitively established. In this context, systematic reviews and meta-analyses of Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) are essential for synthesizing the available evidence and providing clearer conclusions about the potential role of tDCS in treating MDD. This article aims to review and analyze the efficacy and safety of tDCS for MDD through a systematic review and meta-analysis of existing randomized trials [2].

A systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized trials provides a rigorous and comprehensive approach to assessing the effectiveness of tDCS for treating MDD. By pooling data from multiple studies, this method increases statistical power and provides a more reliable estimate of treatment effects.

***Address for Correspondence:** Deanna Sotiras, Department of Rheumatology, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada; E-mail: sotiras.deanna@gmail.com*

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In the case of tDCS, various factors need to be considered, including the specific protocols used (e.g., electrode placement, current intensity, and stimulation duration), the number of treatment sessions, the characteristics of the patient population, and the outcome measures employed to assess treatment efficacy [3]. Additionally, safety data, including any adverse events associated with tDCS, must be evaluated to ensure that the treatment is both effective and well-tolerated by patients. The main objective of this meta-analysis is to examine whether tDCS is superior to placebo or sham treatments in reducing depressive symptoms, as measured by standardized depression rating scales. Furthermore, this analysis seeks to investigate whether tDCS is safe and well-tolerated in clinical populations with MDD [4].

A significant body of literature has examined the use of tDCS in individuals with MDD, with the majority of studies employing a standardized electrode montage targeting the left DLPFC. These studies have generally shown promising results, with patients receiving anodal stimulation over the left DLPFC experiencing greater improvements in depressive symptoms compared to those receiving sham or placebo treatments. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that tDCS can have long-lasting effects, with some studies showing sustained improvements in mood and cognition even after the stimulation sessions have ended. However, the results of individual trials have been inconsistent, and the methodological quality of studies has varied considerably, which complicates the interpretation of findings. In particular, differences in treatment protocols, sample sizes, and study durations have made it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the optimal conditions for tDCS treatment in MDD [5].

Conclusion

In conclusion, transcranial Direct Current Stimulation (tDCS) shows promise as a treatment for major depressive disorder, particularly in individuals who have not responded to conventional therapies. The systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized trials support the efficacy of tDCS in reducing depressive symptoms and suggest that it is generally safe and well-tolerated. However, variability in study designs and outcomes necessitates further research to establish standardized treatment protocols and to better understand the mechanisms underlying tDCS's effects. Future studies should also focus on identifying biomarkers that predict treatment response and on exploring the long-term effects of tDCS. With continued investigation, tDCS may become an integral component of the therapeutic arsenal for treating major depressive disorder, particularly for patients with treatment-resistant forms of the condition.

Acknowledgment

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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