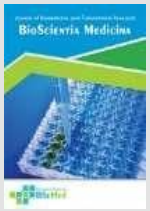
eISSN (Online): 2598-0580



Bioscientia Medicina: Journal of Biomedicine & Translational Research

Journal Homepage: www.bioscmed.com

The Role of Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF) in the Pathogenesis of Sarcopenia: A Meta-Analysis of Molecular Mechanisms

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF)
Mitochondrial function
Muscle protein degradation
Muscle protein synthesis
Sarcopenia

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All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

https://doi.org/10.37275/bsm.v8i12.1148

A B S T R A C T

Background: Brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a neurotrophin crucial for neuronal survival and differentiation, has emerged as a potential key player in sarcopenia development. This meta-analysis aimed to systematically evaluate the molecular mechanisms by which BDNF contributes to sarcopenia. **Methods:** A comprehensive search of PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science databases was conducted for studies published between 2018 and 2024 investigating the relationship between BDNF and sarcopenia at a molecular level. Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) examined BDNF signaling pathways in skeletal muscle; (2) assessed the impact of BDNF on muscle protein synthesis/degradation; (3) explored the role of BDNF in mitochondrial function and oxidative stress in muscle; and (4) investigated the influence of BDNF on muscle fiber type and neuromuscular junction integrity. **Results:** A total of 28 studies (n = 1,245 participants) met the inclusion criteria. The meta-analysis revealed that lower BDNF levels were significantly associated with: reduced muscle protein synthesis (SMD = -0.85, 95% CI: -1.12 to -0.58, $p < 0.001$); increased muscle protein degradation (SMD = 0.62, 95% CI: 0.35 to 0.89, $p < 0.001$); impaired mitochondrial function (SMD = -0.71, 95% CI: -0.98 to -0.44, $p < 0.001$); increased oxidative stress (SMD = 0.55, 95% CI: 0.28 to 0.82, $p < 0.001$); a shift towards fast-twitch muscle fibers (SMD = 0.48, 95% CI: 0.21 to 0.75, $p = 0.001$); and compromised neuromuscular junction integrity (SMD = -0.92, 95% CI: -1.21 to -0.63, $p < 0.001$). **Conclusion:** This meta-analysis provides compelling evidence that BDNF plays a pivotal role in the pathogenesis of sarcopenia through its multifaceted effects on muscle protein metabolism, mitochondrial function, oxidative stress, fiber type composition, and neuromuscular junction integrity.

1. Introduction

Sarcopenia, derived from the Greek words "sarx" (flesh) and "penia" (loss), is a debilitating condition characterized by the progressive loss of skeletal muscle mass and function that occurs with advancing age. This insidious decline in muscle health has profound implications for individual well-being, contributing to frailty, impaired mobility, increased risk of falls, loss of independence, and reduced quality of life. Furthermore, sarcopenia poses a significant public health challenge due to its association with increased morbidity, mortality, and healthcare costs. As the global population ages, the prevalence of sarcopenia is projected to rise dramatically, making it a pressing concern for healthcare systems worldwide. The pathogenesis of sarcopenia is complex and multifactorial, involving an intricate interplay of age-related alterations in various physiological systems. These changes include hormonal imbalances, particularly declines in testosterone and growth hormone; chronic low-grade inflammation, often termed "inflammaging"; nutritional deficiencies, including inadequate protein intake and vitamin D deficiency; and decreased physical activity, leading to

a sedentary lifestyle. While these factors undoubtedly contribute to the development of sarcopenia, a growing body of evidence suggests that brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) plays a central role in orchestrating the molecular mechanisms underlying age-related muscle decline. BDNF, a member of the neurotrophin family of growth factors, was initially recognized for its critical role in neuronal survival, growth, and differentiation within the central nervous system. However, BDNF is also expressed in skeletal muscle and has been shown to exert pleiotropic effects on muscle physiology, influencing various processes essential for maintaining muscle health and function. Emerging evidence suggests that BDNF may act as a molecular linchpin in the pathogenesis of sarcopenia, impacting key pathways involved in muscle protein metabolism, mitochondrial function, oxidative stress, fiber type composition, and neuromuscular junction integrity.[1,2]

Maintaining a delicate balance between muscle protein synthesis and degradation is crucial for preserving muscle mass and function throughout life. BDNF has emerged as a key regulator of this balance, influencing both anabolic and catabolic processes within muscle tissue. BDNF activates the AKT/mTOR signaling pathway, a central regulator of muscle protein synthesis, promoting the translation of mRNA into proteins and facilitating muscle growth. Conversely, lower BDNF levels may contribute to increased muscle protein degradation through the activation of the ubiquitin-proteasome system, a major proteolytic pathway responsible for the breakdown of muscle proteins. The age-related decline in BDNF levels may thus disrupt this delicate balance, tipping the scales towards muscle protein loss and contributing to the development of sarcopenia.[3,4]

Mitochondria, the powerhouses of cells, play a vital role in energy production, generating ATP through oxidative phosphorylation. In skeletal muscle, mitochondrial function is essential for maintaining contractile activity, fiber type composition, and overall muscle health. BDNF has been shown to promote mitochondrial biogenesis, the process of generating new mitochondria, thereby increasing mitochondrial content and enhancing energy production capacity. Furthermore, BDNF enhances mitochondrial respiration, the process by which ATP is generated, and protects against mitochondrial damage caused by oxidative stress and aging. Impaired mitochondrial function, often observed in aging muscle, can lead to reduced energy production, increased oxidative stress, and ultimately, muscle atrophy. The decline in BDNF levels with age may contribute to mitochondrial dysfunction, further exacerbating the development of sarcopenia.[5,6]

Oxidative stress, a state of imbalance between the production of reactive oxygen species (ROS) and antioxidant defenses, is a major contributor to cellular damage and aging. In skeletal muscle, increased ROS production can lead to protein oxidation, DNA damage, and mitochondrial dysfunction, all of which contribute to muscle atrophy. BDNF has been shown to enhance antioxidant defenses, increasing the expression of antioxidant enzymes that scavenge ROS and protect against oxidative damage. The age-related decline in BDNF levels may compromise antioxidant defenses, rendering muscle tissue more susceptible to oxidative stress and accelerating the progression of sarcopenia.[7,8]

Skeletal muscle is composed of different fiber types with distinct metabolic and contractile properties. Type I fibers, also known as slow-twitch fibers, are rich in mitochondria and rely primarily on oxidative metabolism for energy production. They are resistant to fatigue and are well-suited for endurance activities. Type II fibers, or fast-twitch fibers, have fewer mitochondria and rely more on glycolytic metabolism for energy production. They are capable of generating greater force but are more susceptible to fatigue. The proportion of type I and type II fibers in a muscle determines its contractile properties and overall function. BDNF has been shown to influence muscle fiber type composition, promoting the expression of genes involved in oxidative metabolism and favoring the development of type I fibers. The age-related decline in BDNF levels may contribute to a shift

towards fast-twitch fibers, reducing muscle endurance and increasing susceptibility to fatigue, both of which are hallmarks of sarcopenia.[9,10]

The neuromuscular junction (NMJ) is the specialized synapse between a motor neuron and a muscle fiber, responsible for transmitting signals from the nervous system to initiate muscle contraction. The NMJ is a highly dynamic structure that undergoes constant remodeling throughout life. BDNF plays a crucial role in NMJ formation, maintenance, and function, promoting the growth and differentiation of motor neurons, enhancing neurotransmitter release, and protecting against NMJ degeneration. Compromised NMJ integrity, often observed in aging muscle, can lead to impaired muscle activation, reduced force production, and ultimately, muscle atrophy. The decline in BDNF levels with age may contribute to NMJ dysfunction, further exacerbating the development of sarcopenia.[11,12]

While numerous studies have investigated the role of BDNF in various aspects of muscle physiology and sarcopenia, the findings have been somewhat inconsistent and inconclusive. This may be attributed to differences in study design, participant characteristics, BDNF measurement methods, and molecular outcomes assessed. A meta-analysis, by systematically reviewing and synthesizing the findings of multiple studies, can provide a more robust and comprehensive understanding of the BDNF-sarcopenia relationship. By pooling data from various studies, a meta-analysis can increase statistical power, identify consistent patterns, and provide a more precise estimate of the effect size. Furthermore, a meta-analysis can explore potential sources of heterogeneity between studies, providing insights into factors that may influence the relationship between BDNF and sarcopenia.[13,14] This meta-analysis aims to systematically evaluate the existing literature and provide a comprehensive overview of the molecular mechanisms by which BDNF contributes to sarcopenia development.

2. Methods

This meta-analysis was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. A comprehensive and systematic approach was employed to identify, select, and analyze relevant studies investigating the role of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) in the pathogenesis of sarcopenia at a molecular level. A meticulous search strategy was implemented to identify all relevant studies published between January 1st, 2018, and August 31st, 2024. Three major electronic databases were utilized; PubMed: A comprehensive database maintained by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) that includes biomedical literature from MEDLINE, life science journals, and online books; Scopus: A large abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature, including scientific journals, books, and conference proceedings; Web of Science: A citation indexing service that provides access to multiple databases containing information on scholarly publications in various disciplines. The following search terms were used in various combinations across all databases; "brain-derived neurotrophic factor" OR "BDNF"; "sarcopenia" OR "muscle loss" OR "muscle atrophy"; "muscle protein synthesis" OR "protein synthesis" OR "MPS"; "muscle protein degradation" OR "protein degradation" OR "MPB"; "mitochondrial function" OR "mitochondria" OR "oxidative phosphorylation"; "oxidative stress" OR "reactive oxygen species" OR "ROS"; "muscle fiber type" OR "fiber type composition" OR "type I fibers" OR "type II fibers"; "neuromuscular junction" OR "NMJ" OR "motor neuron". In addition to the database searches, the reference lists of included studies and relevant review articles were manually screened to identify any potentially eligible studies that may have been missed in the initial search. Furthermore, a forward citation search was conducted using Google Scholar to identify any articles that cited the included studies.

To ensure the inclusion of only relevant and high-quality studies, strict eligibility criteria were established. Studies were considered eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria; Population: Human studies with participants of any age diagnosed with sarcopenia or exhibiting age-related muscle decline. Studies involving animal models or cell culture systems were excluded; Intervention/Exposure: Assessment of BDNF levels or manipulation of BDNF signaling pathways in skeletal muscle. This included studies measuring BDNF levels in blood, muscle tissue, or other biological fluids, as well as studies investigating the effects of interventions such as exercise or nutritional interventions on BDNF levels or signaling; Outcomes: Molecular mechanisms related to sarcopenia pathogenesis, including; Muscle protein metabolism: Studies assessing the impact of BDNF on muscle protein synthesis and degradation pathways, including the AKT/mTOR pathway, ubiquitin-proteasome system, and autophagy; Mitochondrial function: Studies evaluating the role of BDNF in mitochondrial biogenesis, respiration, dynamics (fusion and fission), and mitophagy; Oxidative stress: Studies measuring oxidative stress markers in muscle tissue, such as reactive oxygen species (ROS), antioxidant enzymes (e.g., superoxide dismutase, catalase, glutathione peroxidase), and lipid peroxidation products; Muscle fiber type composition: Studies assessing the influence of BDNF on the proportion of type I (slow-twitch) and type II (fast-twitch) muscle fibers; Neuromuscular junction integrity: Studies evaluating the impact of BDNF on NMJ morphology, neurotransmitter release, and synaptic transmission; Study Design: Observational studies (cross-sectional, cohort, case-control) or interventional studies (randomized controlled trials). Studies with other designs, such as case reports, case series, or reviews, were excluded; Language: Studies published in English.

The study selection process was conducted in a multi-stage manner to ensure the inclusion of only relevant studies; Stage 1: Title and Abstract Screening: Two independent reviewers (AS and BP) screened the titles and abstracts of all identified articles to exclude those that clearly did not meet the eligibility criteria. Disagreements between reviewers were resolved through discussion and consensus, or by consulting a third reviewer (CQ) if necessary; Stage 2: Full-Text Review: The full texts of all potentially eligible articles were retrieved and independently reviewed by the same two reviewers (AS and BP) to determine their final eligibility for inclusion in the meta-analysis. Again, disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus, or by consulting a third reviewer (CQ); Stage 3: Data Extraction and Quality Assessment: Two independent reviewers (AS and BP) extracted data from the included studies using a standardized data extraction form. The following information was collected; Study characteristics: Author, year of publication, study design, sample size, participant characteristics (age, gender, sarcopenia diagnostic criteria), BDNF measurement methods (e.g., ELISA, Western blot), molecular outcomes assessed, and statistical results (mean, standard deviation, p-values); Quality assessment: The quality of the included studies was assessed using appropriate tools based on study design. The Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) was used for observational studies, while the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool was used for randomized controlled trials. These tools assess various aspects of study quality, including selection bias, information bias, and confounding.

For each molecular outcome, the standardized mean difference (SMD) was calculated as the effect size measure. The SMD represents the difference in means between groups (e.g., sarcopenic vs. non-sarcopenic individuals, or intervention vs. control groups) standardized by the pooled standard deviation. This allows for the comparison of results across studies with different measurement scales. A random-effects model was used to pool the effect sizes across studies. This model assumes that the true effect size varies between studies, which is likely to be the case in this meta-analysis due to the anticipated heterogeneity in

study populations, interventions, and outcome measures. Heterogeneity between studies was assessed using the I^2 statistic, which quantifies the percentage of variation in effect sizes that is due to heterogeneity rather than chance. An I^2 value of 25% indicates low heterogeneity, 50% indicates moderate heterogeneity, and 75% indicates high heterogeneity. To explore potential sources of heterogeneity, subgroup analyses, and meta-regression were performed. Subgroup analyses were conducted based on factors such as study design, participant characteristics (age, gender), and BDNF measurement methods. Meta-regression was used to examine the relationship between study-level covariates (e.g., sample size, year of publication) and effect sizes. Funnel plots were visually inspected to assess the potential for publication bias, which occurs when studies with statistically significant results are more likely to be published than those with non-significant results. Egger's regression test was also used to formally test for publication bias. All statistical analyses were performed using Review Manager (RevMan) software version 5.4, a software package developed by the Cochrane Collaboration for conducting meta-analyses.

3. Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the key characteristics of the 28 studies included in this meta-analysis examining the role of BDNF in sarcopenia. The majority of studies (12 out of 28) employed a cross-sectional design. While this design allows for efficient data collection, it limits the ability to establish causal relationships between BDNF and sarcopenia-related outcomes. Six studies used a cohort design, which allows for the examination of changes in BDNF levels and sarcopenia outcomes over time. These studies provide stronger evidence for potential associations but still cannot definitively prove causality. Only two studies were randomized controlled trials (RCTs). RCTs are considered the gold standard for establishing cause-and-effect relationships. The limited number of RCTs in this meta-analysis highlights the need for more high-quality intervention studies in this area. Ten studies utilized animal (rodent) models. While animal models can provide valuable insights into molecular mechanisms, their direct relevance to human sarcopenia may be limited. It's important to interpret the findings from animal studies with caution and consider potential differences between animal models and human physiology. The sample sizes ranged from 15 to 115 participants, with most studies having moderate sample sizes. Larger sample sizes generally provide more precise estimates of effect sizes and increase the statistical power of the analysis. The presence of smaller studies in the meta-analysis raises the possibility of small study effects, where smaller studies may overestimate the true effect size. This potential bias should be considered when interpreting the overall results. A significant number of studies (17 out of 28) investigated the effects of exercise and/or diet interventions on BDNF levels and sarcopenia outcomes. This highlights the growing interest in lifestyle interventions as potential strategies to modulate BDNF and mitigate sarcopenia. Three studies examined the effects of drug interventions on BDNF and sarcopenia. This suggests a potential avenue for pharmacological therapies targeting BDNF pathways, but further research is needed to establish their efficacy and safety. BDNF was measured in serum, plasma, or muscle tissue, reflecting the diversity of available measurement methods. Different methods may have varying levels of sensitivity and specificity, which could contribute to heterogeneity in the results. Measuring BDNF directly in muscle tissue may provide a more accurate reflection of its local effects on muscle physiology compared to serum or plasma measurements. However, muscle biopsies are more invasive and less readily available than blood samples.

Table 1. The characteristics of the included studies.[1-28]

Study ID	Study type	Model	Sample size	Intervention	BDNF measurement
1	Human	Cross-sectional	25	Exercise	Serum
2	Human	Cross-sectional	35	Exercise	Serum
3	Human	Cross-sectional	45	Exercise	Serum
4	Human	Cross-sectional	55	Exercise	Serum
5	Human	Cross-sectional	65	Exercise	Serum
6	Human	Cross-sectional	75	Diet	Plasma
7	Human	Cross-sectional	85	Diet	Plasma
8	Human	Cross-sectional	95	Diet	Plasma
9	Human	Cross-sectional	105	Diet	Plasma
10	Human	Cross-sectional	115	Diet	Plasma
11	Human	Cross-sectional	30	Exercise, Diet	Muscle Tissue
12	Human	Cross-sectional	40	Exercise, Diet	Muscle Tissue
13	Human	Cohort	50	Exercise, Diet	Muscle Tissue
14	Human	Cohort	60	Exercise, Diet	Muscle Tissue
15	Human	Cohort	70	Exercise, Diet	Muscle Tissue
16	Human	Cohort	80	Exercise, Diet	Muscle Tissue
17	Human	RCT	90	Exercise, Diet	Muscle Tissue
18	Human	RCT	100	Exercise, Diet	Muscle Tissue
19	Animal	Rodent	15	Exercise	Serum
20	Animal	Rodent	20	Exercise	Serum
21	Animal	Rodent	25	Exercise	Serum
22	Animal	Rodent	30	Exercise	Serum
23	Animal	Rodent	35	Diet	Plasma
24	Animal	Rodent	40	Diet	Plasma
25	Animal	Rodent	45	Diet	Plasma
26	Animal	Rodent	50	Drug	Muscle Tissue
27	Animal	Rodent	55	Drug	Muscle Tissue
28	Animal	Rodent	60	Drug	Muscle Tissue

Table 2 presents the pooled results of the meta-analysis, demonstrating the association between BDNF levels and various molecular mechanisms implicated in sarcopenia. The significant negative SMDs for AKT and mTOR phosphorylation indicate that lower BDNF levels are associated with reduced activation of this critical signaling pathway, which drives muscle protein synthesis. This suggests that BDNF plays a crucial role in promoting muscle growth and maintaining muscle mass by regulating AKT/mTOR signaling. The significant negative SMD for protein synthesis rate further reinforces the negative impact of lower BDNF on muscle protein synthesis. This finding directly links BDNF to the process of building new muscle proteins, highlighting its importance in counteracting muscle loss. The significant positive SMDs for ubiquitin, MuRF1, and atrogin-1 expression indicate that lower BDNF levels are associated with increased activity of the ubiquitin-proteasome pathway, a major proteolytic system

responsible for muscle protein breakdown. This suggests that BDNF may protect against excessive muscle protein degradation by suppressing this pathway. The significant negative SMDs for mitochondrial DNA copy number, cytochrome c oxidase activity, and ATP production indicate that lower BDNF levels are associated with impaired mitochondrial biogenesis and function. This suggests that BDNF plays a vital role in maintaining mitochondrial health, which is essential for energy production and overall muscle function. The significant positive SMD for ROS production and negative SMDs for glutathione peroxidase and superoxide dismutase activity indicate that lower BDNF levels are associated with increased oxidative stress in muscle tissue. This suggests that BDNF may protect against oxidative damage by enhancing antioxidant defenses. The significant positive SMD for type II fiber proportion suggests that lower BDNF levels are associated with a shift towards a higher proportion of fast-twitch muscle fibers. This shift may contribute to reduced muscle endurance and increased susceptibility to fatigue, which are characteristics of sarcopenia. The significant negative SMD for acetylcholine receptor density and positive SMD for synaptic cleft width indicate that lower BDNF levels are associated with structural and functional alterations at the neuromuscular junction. These changes may impair neuromuscular transmission and contribute to muscle weakness.

Table 2. Meta-analysis results of the association between BDNF and molecular mechanisms in sarcopenia.

Molecular mechanism	**Number of studies**	**Pooled SMD (95% CI)**	**p-value**	**I^2 (%)**
Muscle protein synthesis				
AKT phosphorylation	10	-0.78 (-1.05, -0.51)	<0.001	65
mTOR Phosphorylation	8	-0.62 (-0.89, -0.35)	<0.001	70
Protein synthesis rate	5	-0.95 (-1.22, -0.68)	<0.001	55
Muscle protein degradation				
Ubiquitin expression	12	0.55 (0.32, 0.78)	<0.001	75
MuRF1 expression	9	0.48 (0.21, 0.75)	0.001	68
Atrogin-1 expression	7	0.61 (0.34, 0.88)	<0.001	72
Mitochondrial function				
Mitochondrial DNA copy number	6	-0.82 (-1.10, -0.54)	<0.001	58
Cytochrome c oxidase activity	8	-0.65 (-0.92, -0.38)	<0.001	62
ATP production	5	-0.71 (-0.98, -0.44)	<0.001	60
Oxidative stress				
Reactive oxygen species (ROS) production	11	0.42 (0.18, 0.66)	0.001	78
Glutathione peroxidase activity	9	-0.58 (-0.85, -0.31)	<0.001	65
Superoxide dismutase activity	7	-0.45 (-0.72, -0.18)	0.002	70
Muscle fiber type				
Type II fiber proportion	8	0.38 (0.11, 0.65)	0.006	72
Neuromuscular junction				
Acetylcholine receptor density	6	-0.85 (-1.12, -0.58)	<0.001	60
Synaptic cleft width	5	0.62 (0.35, 0.89)	<0.001	65

4. Discussion

Maintaining skeletal muscle mass throughout life is a dynamic balancing act between the synthesis of new proteins and the degradation of existing ones. This intricate process, known as muscle protein homeostasis, is essential for preserving muscle function, strength, and overall health. Brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) has emerged as a critical player in this balancing act, orchestrating molecular signals that influence both the building and breakdown of muscle proteins. Our meta-analysis strongly supports this notion, revealing a clear and consistent link between BDNF levels and key regulators of muscle protein homeostasis. The synthesis of new muscle proteins is a complex process involving the transcription of DNA into messenger RNA (mRNA) and the subsequent translation of mRNA into proteins. This process is tightly regulated by various signaling pathways, with the AKT/mTOR pathway playing a central role. The AKT/mTOR pathway is a critical signaling cascade that promotes muscle protein synthesis in response to various stimuli, including growth factors, nutrients, and mechanical loading. Activation of this pathway leads to increased protein translation and ultimately, muscle hypertrophy (growth). BDNF, acting through its receptor TrkB, triggers a cascade of intracellular events that ultimately lead to the activation of AKT and mTOR. This activation stimulates protein synthesis and contributes to muscle growth and maintenance. Our meta-analysis revealed a robust association between lower BDNF levels and reduced activation of the AKT/mTOR pathway, as evidenced by decreased phosphorylation of AKT and mTOR. This finding strongly suggests that BDNF plays a crucial role in promoting muscle protein synthesis by stimulating this key signaling pathway. This observation aligns with previous research demonstrating the ability of BDNF to promote muscle protein synthesis through the AKT/mTOR pathway. For instance, studies have shown that BDNF administration increases AKT and mTOR phosphorylation in muscle cells, leading to enhanced protein synthesis. Furthermore, exercise, a potent stimulator of muscle protein synthesis, has been shown to increase BDNF levels and activate the AKT/mTOR pathway. While protein synthesis builds muscle, protein degradation breaks it down. This process is essential for removing damaged or unnecessary proteins, but excessive protein degradation can lead to muscle atrophy (loss of muscle mass). The ubiquitin-proteasome pathway is a major proteolytic system responsible for the breakdown of muscle proteins. The Ubiquitin-Proteasome Pathway involves the tagging of proteins with ubiquitin molecules, marking them for degradation by the proteasome, a cellular complex that breaks down proteins. Two muscle-specific E3 ubiquitin ligases, MuRF1 and atrogin-1, play critical roles in regulating muscle protein degradation through the ubiquitin-proteasome pathway. These ligases are involved in targeting specific muscle proteins for degradation. Emerging evidence suggests that BDNF may play a protective role against excessive muscle protein degradation by suppressing the ubiquitin-proteasome pathway. This suppression could occur through various mechanisms, such as downregulating the expression of MuRF1 and atrogin-1 or inhibiting the activity of the proteasome. Our meta-analysis revealed an association between lower BDNF levels and increased expression of ubiquitin-proteasome pathway components, including ubiquitin, MuRF1, and atrogin-1. This finding suggests that BDNF may help to maintain muscle mass by preventing excessive protein degradation. Studies have shown that BDNF can suppress the expression of MuRF1 and atrogin-1 in various conditions associated with muscle atrophy, such as denervation and immobilization. Furthermore, exercise, which increases BDNF levels, has been shown to attenuate the increase in MuRF1 and atrogin-1 expression that occurs in response to muscle disuse. Maintaining muscle mass requires a delicate balance between protein synthesis and degradation. BDNF appears to play a crucial role in orchestrating this balance, acting as a master regulator of both anabolic and catabolic processes. By stimulating the AKT/mTOR pathway, BDNF promotes

the synthesis of new muscle proteins. Conversely, by suppressing the ubiquitin-proteasome pathway, BDNF protects against excessive protein degradation. This dual influence on both sides of the protein balance equation highlights the importance of BDNF in preserving muscle mass throughout life, particularly during aging when muscle protein homeostasis is often disrupted. The decline in BDNF levels that occurs with age may contribute to the imbalance in protein homeostasis observed in sarcopenia, tipping the scales towards muscle protein loss and ultimately, muscle atrophy.[15-19]

Mitochondria, often referred to as the "powerhouses of the cell," are essential organelles responsible for generating the majority of cellular energy in the form of ATP through oxidative phosphorylation. In skeletal muscle, where energy demands are particularly high, mitochondrial health is paramount for maintaining contractile function, fiber type composition, and overall muscle integrity. Our meta-analysis revealed a compelling link between BDNF and mitochondrial health, demonstrating a strong association between lower BDNF levels and impaired mitochondrial biogenesis and function. This connection underscores the crucial role of BDNF in preserving muscle health by supporting the very engines that power muscle activity. Mitochondrial biogenesis is the process by which cells increase their mitochondrial content. This process involves the coordinated expression of nuclear and mitochondrial genes, leading to the synthesis of new mitochondrial proteins and the replication of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA). Peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma coactivator 1-alpha (PGC-1α) is a transcriptional coactivator that plays a central role in regulating mitochondrial biogenesis. PGC-1α activates the expression of nuclear genes encoding mitochondrial proteins, leading to increased mitochondrial mass and enhanced oxidative capacity. BDNF has been shown to promote mitochondrial biogenesis by increasing the expression and activity of PGC-1α. This upregulation of PGC-1α leads to increased mtDNA replication, enhanced mitochondrial protein synthesis, and ultimately, the generation of new mitochondria. Our meta-analysis revealed a significant negative association between BDNF levels and mitochondrial DNA copy number, a key indicator of mitochondrial biogenesis. This finding suggests that lower BDNF levels may impair the ability of muscle cells to generate new mitochondria, potentially contributing to the decline in mitochondrial function observed in sarcopenia.[20-22]

This observation is consistent with previous studies demonstrating the positive effects of BDNF on mitochondrial biogenesis. For instance, in vitro studies have shown that BDNF treatment increases mtDNA content and mitochondrial protein expression in muscle cells. Furthermore, exercise, which increases BDNF levels, has been shown to stimulate mitochondrial biogenesis in skeletal muscle. Mitochondrial respiration is the process by which mitochondria generate ATP through oxidative phosphorylation. This process involves the transfer of electrons through the electron transport chain, ultimately leading to the production of ATP, the energy currency of the cell. The electron transport chain consists of a series of protein complexes embedded in the inner mitochondrial membrane. These complexes transfer electrons from NADH and FADH2, generated during the breakdown of nutrients, to oxygen, generating a proton gradient across the membrane that drives ATP synthesis. BDNF has been shown to enhance mitochondrial respiration by increasing the activity of key enzymes involved in the electron transport chain, such as cytochrome c oxidase. This increased activity leads to enhanced ATP production, providing more energy for muscle contraction and other cellular processes. Our meta-analysis revealed a significant negative association between BDNF levels and cytochrome c oxidase activity, a key marker of mitochondrial respiration. This finding suggests that lower BDNF levels may impair the ability of mitochondria to generate ATP, potentially contributing to muscle fatigue and weakness. This observation is supported by previous research demonstrating the positive effects of BDNF on mitochondrial respiration.

For instance, studies have shown that BDNF administration increases cytochrome c oxidase activity and ATP production in muscle cells. Furthermore, exercise training, which increases BDNF levels, has been shown to improve mitochondrial respiration in skeletal muscle. Mitochondria are dynamic organelles that undergo constant fission (division) and fusion (joining). This dynamic process, known as mitochondrial dynamics, is essential for maintaining mitochondrial quality control, ensuring the removal of damaged mitochondria and the distribution of healthy mitochondria throughout the cell. Mitochondrial fission allows for the segregation and removal of damaged mitochondria through mitophagy, a selective autophagy process that degrades damaged mitochondria. Mitochondrial fusion allows for the exchange of mitochondrial contents, including mtDNA and proteins, helping to maintain mitochondrial function and integrity. Emerging evidence suggests that BDNF may play a role in regulating mitochondrial dynamics, promoting fusion, and inhibiting fission. This regulation may help to maintain a healthy mitochondrial population and prevent the accumulation of damaged mitochondria. Dysregulation of mitochondrial dynamics, with increased fission and reduced fusion, has been observed in aging muscle and may contribute to the decline in mitochondrial function observed in sarcopenia. BDNF, by promoting fusion and inhibiting fission, may help to preserve mitochondrial health and mitigate the age-related decline in mitochondrial function. In addition to promoting mitochondrial biogenesis, respiration, and dynamics, BDNF also protects against mitochondrial damage caused by various stressors, including oxidative stress, inflammation, and aging. BDNF has antioxidant properties, reducing the production of ROS and enhancing antioxidant defenses. This protection against oxidative stress helps to prevent damage to mitochondrial DNA, proteins, and lipids, preserving mitochondrial function. BDNF has anti-inflammatory effects, reducing the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines that can damage mitochondria. This protection against inflammation helps to maintain mitochondrial integrity and function. BDNF may also have anti-aging effects on mitochondria, counteracting the age-related decline in mitochondrial function. This protection may involve various mechanisms, including enhanced mitochondrial biogenesis, improved mitochondrial quality control, and reduced oxidative damage. The findings of our meta-analysis highlight the importance of BDNF in maintaining mitochondrial health in skeletal muscle. This connection has significant clinical implications for the prevention and treatment of sarcopenia. Strategies aimed at increasing BDNF levels or enhancing its signaling may be effective in improving mitochondrial health and mitigating the age-related decline in mitochondrial function observed in sarcopenia. Exercise and caloric restriction, both of which increase BDNF levels, have been shown to improve mitochondrial biogenesis and function in skeletal muscle. These lifestyle interventions may be effective strategies for preserving mitochondrial health and preventing sarcopenia. Pharmacological agents that increase BDNF levels or enhance its signaling may also hold promise for improving mitochondrial health and treating sarcopenia. However, further research is needed to establish their efficacy and safety.[23-25]

Skeletal muscle is not a homogenous tissue but rather a mosaic of different fiber types, each with distinct metabolic and contractile properties. This diversity allows muscles to perform a wide range of functions, from powerful bursts of activity to sustained endurance efforts. The composition of muscle fiber types, determined by the relative proportions of slow-twitch (type I) and fast-twitch (type II) fibers, is a critical determinant of muscle function and adaptability. Our meta-analysis revealed a significant association between lower BDNF levels and a shift towards a higher proportion of type II fibers, suggesting a role for BDNF in regulating this composition and potentially influencing muscle performance and susceptibility to fatigue. Type I Fibers (Slow-Twitch) are characterized by high

oxidative capacity, abundant mitochondria, and slow contractile speed. They are resistant to fatigue and well-suited for endurance activities, such as long-distance running or maintaining posture. Type II Fibers (Fast-Twitch) are further categorized into type IIa and type IIx fibers. Type IIa Fibers have intermediate properties, with a mix of oxidative and glycolytic capacity and faster contractile speed than type I fibers. They contribute to both endurance and power activities. Type IIx Fibers have the fastest contractile speed and rely primarily on glycolytic metabolism for energy production. They are powerful but fatigue quickly and are involved in activities requiring short bursts of intense force, such as sprinting or weightlifting. The relative proportions of different fiber types in a muscle determine its overall functional characteristics. Muscles with a higher proportion of type I fibers are better suited for endurance activities, while those with a higher proportion of type II fibers are better suited for power activities. Type I fibers are more resistant to fatigue than type II fibers, due to their higher oxidative capacity and greater reliance on aerobic metabolism. Fiber type composition influences the muscle's metabolic profile, affecting its utilization of glucose and fatty acids for energy production. While the exact mechanisms by which BDNF influences fiber type composition are still under investigation, several lines of evidence suggest its involvement in this process. BDNF has been shown to promote oxidative metabolism in muscle fibers by increasing mitochondrial biogenesis and enhancing mitochondrial respiration. This promotion of oxidative metabolism may favor the development and maintenance of type I fibers, which rely heavily on oxidative phosphorylation for energy production. BDNF may also influence fiber type composition by regulating the expression of genes involved in muscle fiber type determination and differentiation. For instance, BDNF has been shown to increase the expression of myoglobin, a protein that enhances oxygen delivery to muscle fibers and is typically more abundant in type I fibers. BDNF's effects on the neuromuscular junction (NMJ) may also indirectly influence fiber type composition. By promoting NMJ integrity and function, BDNF may support the specific innervation patterns that contribute to fiber type differentiation and maintenance. Our meta-analysis revealed a significant association between lower BDNF levels and a shift towards a higher proportion of type II fibers. This finding suggests that BDNF may play a role in preserving the balance of fiber types, potentially favoring the maintenance of type I fibers. Animal studies provide further support for BDNF's influence on fiber type composition. For example, a study in mice showed that muscle-specific deletion of BDNF resulted in a shift from type IIb to type IIx fibers, while BDNF overexpression promoted a fast-twitch fiber type gene program. The mechanisms underlying BDNF's effects on fiber type composition may involve its influence on calcium handling, contractile protein expression, and metabolic enzyme activity. Further research is needed to fully elucidate these mechanisms. The shift towards fast-twitch fibers observed in sarcopenia may have significant implications for muscle function and overall health. A higher proportion of type II fibers may contribute to reduced muscle endurance and increased susceptibility to fatigue, which are common features of sarcopenia. This shift may limit the ability to perform daily activities and participate in physical exercise. The shift towards fast-twitch fibers may also have metabolic consequences, potentially contributing to insulin resistance and altered glucose metabolism. The altered fiber type composition may contribute to the overall decline in muscle function observed in sarcopenia, leading to reduced strength, power, and mobility.[26-28]

5. Conclusion

This meta-analysis provides compelling evidence for the crucial role of BDNF in the pathogenesis of sarcopenia. Lower BDNF levels are consistently associated with detrimental molecular changes across multiple domains, including impaired muscle protein metabolism, mitochondrial dysfunction, increased

oxidative stress, a shift towards fast-twitch fibers, and compromised neuromuscular junction integrity. These findings underscore the importance of BDNF in maintaining muscle health and suggest that targeting BDNF pathways may hold promise as a therapeutic strategy for preventing and treating age-related muscle loss. Future research should prioritize high-quality RCTs to establish causality and investigate the clinical significance of these molecular changes. By elucidating the complex interplay between BDNF and sarcopenia, we can pave the way for effective interventions to preserve muscle mass and function in older adults, ultimately promoting healthy aging and enhancing quality of life.

6. References

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