Treatment-Induced Epigenetic Modifications in MCI and Probable Alzheimer's Disease

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BACKGROUND

- Alzheimer's disease (AD) exhibits global and several tissue- and gene-specific alterations in DNA methylation, ¹⁻³ an epigenetic modification generally occurring at CpG sites,⁴ as well as an increase in the epigenetic age,⁵ a reliable indicator of biological age and overall health⁶
- Chronic inflammation, thought to be instrumental in AD pathogenesis and disease progression,⁷ has also been shown to induce extensive and aberrant DNA hypermethylation
- NE3107 is an investigative, oral, small-molecule, blood-brain barrier-permeable compound with potential anti-inflammatory and insulinsensitizing functions thought to result from binding to ERK and selectively inhibiting ERK-, NF-κB–, and TNF-α–stimulated inflammatory signaling, without affecting homeostasis, and is being evaluated for its ability to slow or prevent progression of MCI and AD⁹
- In a recent exploratory, phase 2, open-label, 3-month clinical trial (NCT05227820) in 23 patients with MCI or mild to moderate dementia, NE3107 treatment was associated with the following clinical improvements:
- Increased perfusion and functional connectivity in several regions of the brain (primary endpoint)¹⁰
- Reduced inflammation (lower TNF- α), CSF AD biomarkers (pTau and pTau:A β 42 ratio), and oxidative stress (increased brain glutathione)¹¹
- Better neurocognitive functioning (including improved ADAS-Cog11, QDRS, and ADCOMS)¹²
- Significant improvements in the clinician-, patient-, and caretaker-rated Global Rating of Change (GRC)¹²
- Reduction in depression severity and improvement of dementia symptoms¹³

• Given the potential roles of inflammation and aberrant DNA methylation (DNAm) in AD pathophysiology, we evaluated the scope of the anti-inflammatory effects of NE3107, including changes in DNA methylation and epigenetic age of the patients in the NCT05227820 tria

OBJECTIVES

- This exploratory, phase 2, open-label, 3-month study explored the potential effects of anti-inflammatory NE3107 treatment on epigenetic modifications, specifically DNA methylation, in addition to neurophysiological health, neurocognitive function, biomarker status, oxidative stress, depression symptoms, and functional improvement (GRC), as well as the overall treatment experience, in patients with dementia
- Here, we report the post-treatment changes in the DNAm-based skin and blood clock⁶ profile, gene-specific changes in the DNAm profile, as well as correlations among changes in DNAm and other clinical measures from the study

METHODS

Study Design

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• This was a single-arm, open-label, phase 2 trial evaluating the efficacy and safety of 20-mg oral NE3107 administered twice daily (approximately 12 hours apart) to patients with clinical dementia over a duration of 3 months (Figure 1)

Study Population

- Key inclusion criteria
- Age 50-89 years
- Diagnosis of cognitive decline due to degenerative dementia
- QDRS score range 1.5-12.5; converted CDR score of 0.5 (MCI) or 1 (mild dementia)

Figure 1. Study design



Assessments

Primary – change from baseline to treatment completion

• Multi-modal brain MRIs performed at baseline and treatment completion assessed structural and functional cerebral alterations associated with AD

Secondary – changes from baseline to treatment completion

- Serological inflammatory marker: TNF-α
- AD CSF biomarkers: Aβ42, pTau, pTau:Aβ42 ratio, and total Tau
- · Cognitive performance assessments, including ADAS-Cog11, MoCA, and MMSE
- Participants, clinicians, and caregivers reported a GRC upon study completion
- Depression symptoms: Patient Depression Questionnaire (PDQ-9)
- Dementia symptoms and treatment experience: 60-minute semi-structured participant interviews
- Skin and blood clock analyses
- Gene-specific DNAm alterations
- Illumina 850K array DNA methylation changes following 14 weeks of NE3107 treatment were sorted and the top 400 CpGs with decreased methylation (decreases >50%) were explored for correlations with changes in clinical results following treatment
- In addition, changes in MCI/AD clinical measures from baseline to 14 weeks were compared with changes in all individual CpG residues in the Illumina 850K array

AATF, apoptosis antagonizing transcription factor; BID, twice daily; BRC, baculoviral IAP repeat-containing; BP, blood pressure; CDR, clinical Dementia Rating; CI, confidence interval; CPC, cytosine-phosphate-guartine; SOS, glutathione-disulfide reductase; ACT, glutathione synthetase; APOE, apolipoprotein E; ARSB, anyloid beta; CR, glutathione synthetase; ACT, glutathione beroxidase; GSR, glutathione synthetase; GST, glutathione synthetase; GSR, glutathione synthetase; GST, glutathione synthetase; GSR, glutathione synthetase; GSR, glutathione synthetase; GST, glutathione synthetase; GSR, glutathione synthetase; GST, glutathione synthetase; GST, glutathione synthetase; GSR, glutathione synthetase; GST, glutathione synthetase; GST, glutathione synthetase; GST, glutathione synthetase; GSR, glutathione synthetase; GST, glutathione synthetase; GST, glutathione synthetase; GSR, glutathione synthetase; GST, glutathione synthetase; GSR, glutathione synthetase; GST, g transferase; IAP, inhibitors of apoptosis; IGF, insulin-like growth factor; IGF, insulin-like growth factor; NRS, magnetic resonance imaging; MRS, magnetic resonance spectros copy; NBM, nucleus basalis of Meynert; NCF, insulin-like growth factor; NCF, insulin receptor; NCF, insulin-like growth factor; NCF, insulation; NCF, insulin-like growth factor; NCF, insul killer; ns, not significant; NTF3, neurotrophin 3; NTRK, neurotrophic tyrosine tyros

- 23 patients were enrolled in the study and received 20-mg oral NE3107 twice daily for 3 months
- Table 1 shows the demographic and baseline characteristics of the study patients Skin and blood clock analysis
- At baseline, patients' epigenetic age (estimated using the DNAm-based skin and blood clock) closely matched their chronological age (+0.3 y; **Tables 1** and **2**)
- Several statistically significant improvements in the DNAm-based outcomes were seen after 3 months of NE3107 treatment (Figure 2 and Table 2):
- The epigenetic age decreased by 3.3 years, indicating a younger biological age compared to baseline
- DNAmPackYears, a DNAm-based estimation of smoking pack-years,¹⁴ was reduced by 9.4 years or 39%
- DNAmLeptin was reduced by 40% after NE3107 treatment
- DNAmMonocyte correlated with monocyte frequency at baseline, and while monocyte frequency did not change significantly over 3 months, DNAmMonocyte was reduced by 29%
- There were no significant changes in DNAm of T cells, NK cells, or granulocytes (Table 2)

Figure 2. Change from baseline in DNAm (skin and blood clock analysis)



Table 2. Skin and blood clock analysis

Parameter	Baseline, mean (SD)	3 months, mean (SD)	Change, mean (%)	P ^a	Patients experiencing improvement, n (%) (N=22)		
Epigenetic ageª, y	age ^a , y 70.8 (10.6)		−3.3 (−4.7%) 95% Cl: −5.3 to −1.4	0.002	19 (86)		
DNAmPackYears	24.1 (9.7)	14.6 (9.5)	−9.4 (−39%) 95% CI: −14.2 to −4.6	0.005	21 (95)		
DNAmLeptin (CpGs)	13141 (3634)	7829 (3595)	-5312 (-40%) 95% Cl: -6727 to -3897 <0.0001		22 (100)		
Blood Cell Frequency (Freq)							
DNAmMonocytes (Freq)	0.076 (0.019)	0.054 (0.024)	-0.022 (-29%) 95% CI: -0.034 to -0.0102	0.001	17 (77)		
Monocytes (Freq)	0.046 (0.124)	0.044 (0.104)	-0.002 (-4.9%)	ns	-		
Correlation ^b , mean (<i>P</i>)	0.156 (0.076)	0.00047 (0.928)					
DNAmCD8Tcell	0.014 (0.019)	0.013 (0.021)	-0.002 (-12%)	ns	-		
DNAmCD4Tcell	0.185 (0.105)	0.152 (0.069)	-0.033 (-18%)	ns	-		
DNAmNKcell 0.0629 (0.039) 0.0632 (0.054)		0.0003 (0.5%)	ns	_			
DNAmGranulocyte 0.667 (0.131)		0.653 (0.103)	-0.015 (-2.2%)	ns	_		
test: ^b R ² (t distribution)							

RESULTS

	Table 1. Baseline characteristics				
	Characteristic	All patients (N=23)			
	Age, mean (SD)	71.1 (9.50)			
	Gender, n (%) Female Male	16 (70) 7 (30)			
	Family history, n (%) AD AD, dementia, unspecified etiology AD, PD Dementia, unspecified etiology PD	5 (22) 2 (9) 1 (4) 4 (17) 1 (4)			
	QDRS score, mean	5.07			
	CDR score, n (%) 0.5 1	18 (78) 5 (22)			
	MMSE, n (%) ≥20 (MCI to mild dementia) <20 (moderate dementia)	18 (78) 5 (22)			
	PDQ-9, n (%) <5 (none to minimal depression) ≥5 (mild, moderate, or severe depression)	n=22 7 (32) 15 (68)			
	APOE status ε2/ε3 ε2/ε4 ε3/ε3 ε3/ε4 ε4/ε4	2 (9) 1 (4) 9 (39) 10 (44) 1 (4)			

Gene-specific DNAm analysis

- The top 400 CpGs with decreased methylation (decreases >50%) were explored for correlations with changes in clinical results following treatment
- 366/400 CpGs were associated with identified genes
- Changes for CpGs that showed Spearman correlations (P<0.05) with individual clinical changes (biomarker, cognition, function, and imaging) were highly intercorrelated and were predominantly related to genes for which decreased expression has been implicated in AD
- A total of 167 of these genes showed significant Spearman correlations with changes in at least 1 clinical measure from the study -42 of these correlated with ≥ 2 clinical measures, with correlations in the direction of improvement for the clinical measures (Table 3)
- One such gene, *CEP112*, which encodes centrosomal protein 112, important for cell division and cell cycle progression,¹⁵ and is downregulated in AD,¹⁶ showed significant reduction in DNAm which was correlated with several measures of cognition, specifically ADAS-Cog11, CDR, and ADCOMS (**Figure 4**)
- CpG residues with a significant median decrease in the change from baseline were individually correlated with each clinical measure evaluated as part of the clinical trial
- The frequency of significant Spearman correlations for changes in all 850K CpGs within representative genes involved in insulin signaling; anti-oxidant, anti-inflammatory, anti-apoptotic, and anti-amyloid responses; and neurostimulation was calculated for each clinical measure (Table 4)

Table 3. Gene-specific DNAm analysis

Gene	Probe	Median DNAm change	Significant Spearman correlations with clinical measures ^a	
CEP85L	cg14346555	-0.590	↓ADAS-Cog11, ↑grey matter	
SPDYE4	cg21610999	-0.5568	↓ADAS-Cog11, ↑precuneus glutathione	
VRK2	cg13118287	-0.568	↓ADAS-Cog11, ↑GRC	
CEP112	cg01504018	-0.531	↓ADAS-Cog11, ↓CDR, ↓ADCOMS, ↑GRC	
ILKAP	cg20598555	-0.539	↓ADCOMS, ↓QDRS	
DBNDD2	cg01373262	-0.561	↓CDR, ↓ADCOMS	
CAB39L	cg00467160	-0.544	↓ADCOMS, ↓QDRS, ↑GRC, ↓CSF Tau	
SLC37A1	cg11453546	-0.546	↓ADCOMS, ↑CSF glucose	
SLC26A1	cg23958868	-0.573	↓ADCOMS, ↓QDRS	
NPHP4	cg15324288	-0.528	↓ADCOMS, ↓QDRS	
IQGAP1	cg23480821	-0.515	↓ADCOMS, ↓CSF Aβ42	
OR10G7	cg18910882	-0.525	↑GRC, ↓QDRS-behavior	
WDR59	cg00519320	-0.514	↓PDQ-9, ↑frontal lobe	
CXCR7	cg15650509	-0.549	↓CSF pTau, ↓CSF pTau/Aβ42, ↓CSF Tau	
KIR2DL3	cg01171428	-0.550	\uparrow precuneus glutathione, \downarrow CSF A β 42, \downarrow systolic BP	
PAIP2B	cg16116663	-0.538	↓CSF Aβ42, ↓CSF Tau	
SRSF4	cg01993027	-0.564	\downarrow CSF pTau/A β 42, \uparrow grey matter, \uparrow frontal lobe, \uparrow CSF A β 42	
SELT	cg00832928	-0.593	↑frontal lobe, ↑grey matter	
PELP1	cg13593809	-0.578	↑frontal lobe, ↑grey matter, ↓weight	
MCM10	cg01490296	-0.572	†grey matter, ↓systolic BP	
EMC2	cg13442241	-0.552	↑grey matter, ↓systolic BP	
DHFR	cg04272309	-0.543	↑precuneus glutathione, ↑frontal lobe, ↑grey matter	
LRRC69	cg09339848	-0.534	\downarrow CSF pTau/A β 42, \uparrow precuneus glutathione, \uparrow frontal lobe, \uparrow grey matter	
FAM184A	cg24402990	-0.516	↑precuneus glutathione, ↑grey matter	
RBPJL	cg27133230	-0.559	↑precuneus glutathione, ↑frontal lobe	
INO80	cg00470768	-0.548	↑precuneus glutathione, ↓systolic BP	
SLC41A2	cg24073653	-0.533	↑precuneus glutathione, ↓systolic BP	

CEP112

0.0 0.5

CDR

r=0.449

P=0.036

n=22

Figure 4. Correlations between changes in *CEP112* DNAm and cognitive outcomes







CEP112

Post-treatment improvements in correlations

• The number of significant positive correlations between CDR and the genes with >50% DNAm reduction increased from 11 at baseline to 38 after NE3107 treatment (Fisher exact test *P*<0.0001)

• Similar increases in the number of significant positive correlations were seen with other clinical measures, including QDRS, PDQ-9, and GRC, suggesting a re-establishment of homeostasis

Table 4. Frequency of significant Spearman correlations between changes in DNAm (individual CpG residues) and clinical measures after 14 weeks of NE3107 treatment

Clinical measure	Insulin signaling ^a	Anti-oxidant ^b	Anti- inflammatory ^c	Anti-apoptotic ^d	Anti-amyloid ^e	Neuro- stimulatory ^f			
MRI neuroimaging									
Hippocampus	16	24	9	4	3	1			
Grey matter ^g	91	78	24	24	22	26			
Frontal lobe	238	152	44	49	36	69			
Temporal lobe	181	112	26	28	13	49			
Parietal lobe	91	154	40	47	14	74			
Occipital lobe	42	28	9	2	2	5			
Glutathione	67	43	27	14	8	20			
Cognitive asses	Cognitive assessments								
CDR	15	23	13	5	5	10			
MMSE	31	29	18	7	3	5			
ADAS-Cog11	26	16	12	4	9	8			
ADCOMS	13	17	4	3	5	8			
MoCA	23	8	8	2	2	6			
QDRS	10	19	6	3	1	8			
PDQ-9	71	49	22	6	17	18			
Biomarkers									
pTau	22	26	6	6	3	12			
pTau/Aβ42	46	43	19	6	5	15			
Αβ42	11	24	9	7	1	15			
Tau	34	38	10	2	2	15			
TNF-α	23	17	14	7	8	8			

eINS, INSR, IGF, IGFR, IRS, AKT, and PI3K; ^bGST, GPX, GSS, GSR, AATF, ARSB, ATM, NEDD4, ZMAT, TXN, TXNRD, and PRDX; ^cIL6, IL4, IL10, IL13, NFKBIB, SIRT, and LRRFIP1; ^dIAP and BIRC; ^eSORL1, PIGK, UBA1, and ZNF331; ⁱNEUROD1, BDNF, NGF, NTRK, NTF3, and CEP112; ^gSubcortical grey matter.

CONCLUSIONS

- Overall, NE3107 treatment significantly decreased the epigenetic (biological) age compared to the chronological age and was associated with significant reductions in DNAmPackYears, DNAmLeptin, and DNAmMonocytes
- NE3107 treatment was also associated with >50% reduction in DNAm of 400 CpGs, 366 of which had identifiable genes
- When correlations were examined for the entire 850K array, potentially functional correlations were observed between clinical and epigenetic changes
- Increases in precuneus glutathione levels (measured by MRS) significantly correlated with reductions in the DNAm of 43 CpGs related to antioxidant genes, including those encoding glutathione and thioredoxin enzymes
- Decreased glutathione levels have been shown to be associated with cognitive decline in humans¹⁷
- Thioredoxin has been shown to be associated with AD progression and cognitive changes in human tissue and human subjects^{18,19}
- Reduction in plasma TNF-α levels significantly correlated with reductions in the DNAm of 14 CpGs related to anti-inflammatory genes, including IL6, IL10, and also LRRFIP1, whose protein product represses TNF-α expression²
- Experimental therapies targeting TNF-α in humans have been associated with improved cognitive function²¹
- Volumetric changes in the hippocampus, subcortical grey matter, as well as frontal, temporal, parietal, and occipital lobes significantly correlated with reductions in the DNAm of numerous CpGs associated with genes related to insulin signaling and anti-oxidant responses - Volumetric changes in the brain have been associated with alterations in cognitive function in patients with MCI and dementia²²
- NE3107 may trigger epigenetic changes that alleviate inflammation and oxidative stress, restoring homeostatic regulation and enabling the recovery of gene expression that may improve several clinical measures of MCI and AD; transcriptomic analyses in future studies may help validate this hypothesis
- Metabolic dysregulation is a cardinal feature of AD,²³ and findings from this study suggest that NE3107 may help to restore metabolic homeostasis through extensive epigenetic remodeling and increased correlations between clinical measures and genes with reduced DNAm, consistent with its pro-homeostatic effects in obese patients with diabetes²⁴
- Taken together, NE3107 treatment-associated changes may be indicative of broad and multisystemic regulatory activities within mechanisms associated with the diagnosis and progression of cognitive disorders, MCI, and dementia²²
- These data suggest that NE3107 may have broader anti-inflammatory functions than previously thought and support further investigation of NE3107 in AD
- An ongoing phase 3, placebo-controlled study (NCT04669028) is evaluating the safety and efficacy of NE3107 in ~400 patients with probable AD

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