

*IN VIVO* MRI STUDIES OF STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN THE MOUSE BRAIN  
FOLLOWING FORCED TREADMILL TRAINING

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## Abstract

### Introduction

Environmental enrichment and exercise are known to promote brain plasticity. The cellular underpinnings associated with plasticity related changes to brain structure remain unknown. Anatomical changes of volume and biochemistry occurring in the brain following forced treadmill training are well documented in both animal and human literature, but little is known about the underlying physiology of how one is connected to the other. The objective of this study was therefore to perform longitudinal *in vivo* scans following exercise and to investigate these underlying cellular mechanisms.

### Methods

3-month-old CD1 male littermate mice were randomly assigned to two groups. One group (n = 15) was exposed to 6 weeks of forced treadmill (FT) at escalating speeds, increasing 1cm/sec per week beginning at 24cm/sec. A control group (n = 12) received no treadmill exposure (NX) for the same 6-week interval.

Mice were spatially normalized to an anatomical template (PERMITS<sup>TM</sup>, Biospective Inc.), providing extracted mean values of volume in 7 different cortical and subcortical regions. All scans were obtained from a 7T Bruker Pharmascan system. Baseline scans were obtained following a weeklong training at low speed (15cm/sec) for all mice. A second scan was obtained from each mouse following the 6-week interval of either forced treadmill or no exercise. Upon completion of the final scan, all animals were sacrificed for histological examination.

### Results

Analysis of volume measurements taken from baseline and post-exercise scans revealed that 6 weeks of forced treadmill led to a significantly larger increase in hippocampal volume in FT mice (13.74%) compared to the increase in NX controls (4.13%) ( $t(24) = 8.36$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ). Analysis of the amygdala showed an increase in volume in the FT group (6.21%) compared to a decrease in amygdala volume in the NX controls (-1.39%) ( $t(24) = 3.8$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Explored group differences in cortical thickness and volume for 5 other regions revealed no significant distinction.

### Conclusions

We observed a significant increase in both hippocampal and amygdala volume of mice following forced treadmill compared to controls. The cellular physiology that underlies these increases is being investigated and will reveal a better understanding of how these regions change after exercise training and how the brain changes in response to activity.

## **Introduction:**

The brain changes in response to the environment (Hubel, 1963; Martin, 2000; Buonomano, 1998). After development, activity-dependent plastic changes occur within the brain to maintain survival and create a behavioral and physiological equilibrium with a dynamic environment. This ability to learn and adapt rapidly has been essential to human evolution and our primacy in nature (Wexler, 2011).

Tissues in the body increase their own blood perfusion based on activity, which if persistent, can result in hypertrophy of the cells (Kumar, 2009). When functional regions of the brain are more active, they require a larger supply of nutrients and signaling molecules, which increases blood perfusion in that region (Churchill, 2002). This increase can lead to the growth of cells, vascular development and an increase in capillary growth. (Kumar, 2009; Churchill, 2002). If the activity involved also includes learning or motor training, development of the synaptic network and associated cellular components can occur, leading to changes in communication and signaling, electrical activity, neuronal morphology, axonal and dendritic remodeling and protein composition. If these structural changes occur in the brain on a large scale, they can be observed and measured through structural magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)(Zatorre, 2012).

## History

The first speculation that brain tissue was plastic and could be altered through behavior began in the works of psychologist William James. In 1890, James published *The Principles of Psychology*, a seminal work that established a foundation from which both fields of psychology and neuroscience would arise. In this book, he first describes organic matter as being ‘plastic’ and suggests the possibilities that brain tissue is capable of changing its physiology in response to the environment:

“Two elementary brain processes have been active together or in immediate succession, one of them, on reoccurring, tends to propagate its excitement into the other” (James, 1890).

The predominant theory of brain tissue at the time James wrote his *Principles of Psychology* was the ‘diffuse nerve net’ or reticular theory endorsed by the Nobel Prize laureate Camille Golgi and followers. This theory described the nervous system as a single diffuse network (Berlucchi, 2009). This theory was soon replaced with ‘Neuron theory’ proposed and encouraged by Santiago Ramon y Cajal in the final decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cajal discovered the axonal growth cone and determined that brain tissue was not a continuous diffuse network but composed of discrete, specialized cells that somehow communicate with one another (Finger, 2000). In 1893, the Italian psychiatrist Eugenio Tanzi, proposed that waves of excitation in the brain could cross distances that we now call synaptic clefts. He speculated that if these waves were repeated within a neural pathway through behavioral conditioning or learning, this could lead to

hypertrophy of associated neurons within this path and reduce resistance, making the crossing between neurons easier (Berlucchi, 2009). Building off this idea, Cajal expanded the theory that pathways in the brain changed over time, adding his belief that these networks required the creation of new pathways through growth of dendritic arborization and axonal branching and that this could be directly associated to the addition or loss of mental faculties (Azmitia, 2007). This speculation could be investigated and confirmed following the pioneering work of Charles Sherrington, in which he revealed the existence of the synapse between neurons and the unidirectionality along neural pathways (Pearce, 2004). Karl Lashley, a student of the prominent creator of behaviorist psychology James B. Watson, explored these theories of activity-dependent plasticity by examining changes in the cortex following behavioral training or changes in behavior following lesions to the cortex. He discovered that memories were not localized in the brain, but were spread out through networks in the cortex. He designed two theories that have become integral to the study of neuroplasticity: The theories of mass action and equipotentiality. The theory of mass action suggests the quality of learning depends on the amount of cortex available; damage to the cortex results in lower quality of performance dependent on the amount of tissue destroyed. The theory of equipotentiality describes cortical tissue as being capable of taking over function from any surrounding tissue. If cortical tissue is damaged within a region, surrounding tissue can take over the functional loss of that lesion (Josselyn, 2010). Lashley's discoveries were important to plasticity because they revealed that the brain was highly malleable and could be shaped on a larger scale than ever conceived.

Early research into neuroplasticity revealed many findings about how the brain structurally organizes itself and develops, but by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century these theories were poorly connected and accepted universally until 1949 when Donald Hebb published *The Organization of Behavior* (Berlucchi, 2009). Hebb proposed that conditioning in the brain, specifically learned tasks, occurs through the strengthening of weak or nonexistent synapses through chemical modification or changes in electrical properties (Hebb, 1949).

“...when an axon of cell A is near enough to excite a cell B and repeatedly or persistently takes part in firing it, some growth process or metabolic change takes place in one or both cells such that A’s efficiency as one of the cells firing B is increased.” (Hebb, 1949).

This concept of Hebbian plasticity established that learning and training alters the brain through repeated stimulation that develops neural pathways, strengthening communication at the synapse between neurons in a network. The field of activity-dependent plasticity, the idea that experience, training and environmental stimuli can shape the organization of brain tissue grew from these studies (Berlucchi, 2009).

### **Activity-Dependent Structural Plasticity**

Numerous studies have observed significant structural changes in response to activity/experience (Maguire, 2000; Bermudez, 2009; Schneider, 2002, Draganski, 2004), disease (Jubault, 2010), genetic variations (Egon, 2003) and maturity (Chen, 2011; Erickson, 2011). One of the earliest landmark studies investigating the role of activity in brain reorganization examined the size of hippocampus within London taxi drivers



(Maguire, 2000). A large increase in the posterior hippocampus and decrease in the anterior hippocampus in taxi drivers compared to non-taxi drivers was observed. These changes in volume are regarded as being related to the drivers' dependence on spatial navigation for traversing the city efficiently (Maguire, 2000). This structural change was observed to be duration dependent, as time spent as a taxi driver was positively correlated with growth in the right posterior hippocampus and negatively correlated with growth in the anterior hippocampus (Maguire, 2000). A further study (Maguire, 2006) confirmed these results in comparison with bus drivers. Taxi drivers again exhibited an increase in gray matter in the right posterior hippocampus whereas bus drivers did not. Bus drivers drive planned routes in repetition and therefore do not require spatial memory to perform and lack the structural alteration to the hippocampus (Maguire, 2006). In 2004, the May lab published a paper that revealed how repeated training could be used to directly alter brain structure. They trained participants to juggle over a 3-month period following a baseline scan. After this 3 month training, both participants and non-juggling controls were scanned again and these scans were compared to baseline. An increase in gray matter was discovered in the mid-temporal area (hMT/V5) and the left posterior intraparietal sulcus in those that were taught to juggle (Draganski, 2004). A decrease in this change in gray matter was noted from a third scan following a 3 month period with no training or practice, but not significantly, leaving open the question of how long these effects persist (Draganski, 2004). These studies indicate that training and experience can impact the structural organization of the brain, however neither study provided any biological conclusion as to how and why these changes occurred.

A similar finding was uncovered more recently in mice using variations of the Morris water maze task. In 2011, Lerch et al. detailed how activity-dependent brain restructuring occurs within mice and how it can be measured through MRI. A task dependent increase in volume was discovered after mice were trained in either a spatially oriented swim maze task or a cued swim maze task. Mice trained to use spatial navigational cues posted around the maze to discover a platform showed a 3.1% increase in hippocampal volume as measured through high resolution MRI. Mice trained to use non-spatial cues to locate the platform, such as a 4-inch marker, had a 1.9% increase in the striatum, but no change in the hippocampus (Lerch, 2011). The hippocampal increase in volume was also significantly correlated with GAP-43 staining expression, an axonal growth cone marker, indicating a change in neuronal morphology may have contributed to these observed volume changes (Lerch, 2011).

### **Exercise**

Exercise provides a robust model for investigating changes in brain shape and volume following activity. Voluntary access to wheel running or forced treadmill leads to extensive, global changes to the brain including neurogenesis (Van Praag, 1999; Van praag, 2005; Li, 2013), angiogenesis (Swain, 2003; Kleim, 2002), astrogliosis (Li, 2005) and cortical thickness (Anderson, 2002).

Numerous studies have provided observations of exercise driven changes in the brain, but few connect the cellular and biochemical mechanisms that underlie these changes. We

were interested in designing an assay to induce a structural brain change within a mouse brain measurable *in vivo* through MRI. This experiment consisted of three aims:

Aim 1 – Establish if six weeks of forced treadmill at escalating speed per week would induce an MRI detectable reorganization in brain structure in a living mouse.

Aim 2 – Understand the cellular mechanisms that underlie MRI detectable changes in brain structure

Aim 3 – Examine how structural brain reorganization changes in aging and cognitively impaired mice

In order to investigate if we could induce a structural brain change detectable by MRI, we trained mice on a 5-lane treadmill for 6 weeks to induce a change in brain shape measurable through MRI. Several studies (Soya, 2007; Lin 2012, Liu, 2009) characterized forced treadmill as an appropriate platform for this induction. We expected that by using a simple motor task like the treadmill, we could induce discrete and bilateral changes in structure within the brain, which could then be investigated histologically.

## **Methods:**

### **Mice:**

27 male (aged 90 days) CD1 mice (Charles River, Senneville, QC) littermates were used in these experiments. Animals were housed 3 – 4 per cage in standard housing conditions. Mice were housed under a 12-h light: 12-h dark schedule and fed standard laboratory chow and water ad libitum. Experiments were approved by the Animal Ethics Committee of the Montreal Neurological Institute and McGill University, and were conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC).

### **Exercise Training Procedures:**

Exercise testing was conducted on a 5-lane treadmill for mice (Harvard Apparatus, Saint Laurent, Quebec), located in a behavioral testing room approved by the Animal Ethics Committee of the Montreal Neurological Institute and McGill University.

All mice were initially trained together for 7 days under low speeds (15cm/sec) for 15 minutes per day to familiarize all mice to the treadmill procedure. Following this training, the mice were split into two groups: exercise and sedentary control. Mice in the exercise group (n = 15) were forced to run on a treadmill each day (09:30am +/- 60 minutes) for 60 minutes, 6 days a week, at escalating speeds beginning at 24cm/sec on

week 1 and increasing 1cm/sec per week to 29cm/sec on week 6. The added distance of one centimeter increases total distance in 60 minutes by 36 meters per week (1cm/sec = 36 meters/60mins). We measured front right footfalls with slow motion video and found an average increase of 8.75% in total footfalls with each additional cm/sec per week.

### **In vivo MRI Acquisition:**

Mice were anesthetized with an induction dose of 4–5% sevoflurane and secured in an MRI compatible bed. All MRI studies were performed under 2.5–3% sevoflurane in medical air and animals were allowed to breathe spontaneously without mechanical ventilation. Respiration rate and body temperature were continuously monitored using an MR-compatible system (Small Animal Instruments Inc., Stony Brook, NY) and the temperature was maintained at  $37 \pm 0.2$  °C throughout the study using a feedback-regulated warming system (Small Animal Instruments Inc., Stony Brook, NY). All MR images were obtained from a 7T Bruker Pharmascan system (Bruker Biospin, Ettlingen, Germany) using a 28-mm inner- diameter, quadrature volume resonator (RAPID MR International, Columbus, OH). Anatomical images were acquired using a 3D balanced Steady-State Free Precession (b-SSFP) sequence with repetition time (TR) = 5.2 ms, echo time (TE) = 2.6 ms, flip angle = 30°, matrix size =  $128 \times 128 \times 64$ , field-of-view =  $1.8 \times 1.8 \times 0.9$  cm, spatial resolution =  $140 \times 140 \times 140$  µm, number of phase-cycles = 4, number of averages = 4, and acquisition time = 35 min. The phase-cycled images were combined using the sum-of-squares reconstruction method in order to minimize banding artifacts (Bangerter et al., 2004).

### **MRI Processing:**

An unbiased, symmetric, customized template was generated using the anatomical scans from the 27 CD1 male mice using an iterative process (Fonov et al., 2011; Lau et al., 2008). Prior to template generation, each reconstructed image volume underwent image non-uniformity correction using the N3 algorithm (Sled et al., 1998), brain masking, and linear spatial normalization utilizing a 12-parameter affine transformation (Collins et al., 1994) to map individual images from native coordinate space to reference space. Briefly, the template generation process involved an iterative (coarse-to-fine resolution) estimation of the nonlinear transformation to match each MRI scan to the evolving average of the population (Grand'maison et al., 2013). The final anatomical template (population average) was generated with an isotropic voxel resolution of 0.06 mm. This customized template was parcellated into an atlas, including the following neocortical and subcortical regions: anterior cingulate cortex, entorhinal cortex, motor cortex, posterior cingulate cortex, retrosplenial cortex, somatosensory cortex 1, somatosensory cortex 2, hippocampus and amygdala, using the Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI) DISPLAY software package (<http://www.bic.mni.mcgill.ca>).

#### *Measuring ROI-based Cortical Thickness*

For cortical thickness measurements, the cortical mask with inside, outside, interhemispheric, and resistive boundaries was nonlinearly aligned with each subject using the template-to-subject transformation. Streamlines running from the inner to outer boundaries of the cortex were defined using Laplace's equation and their length was used as the measure of cortical thickness (Lerch et al., 2008). The mean cortical thickness was computed from an intermediate surface for each of the pre-defined ROIs from the

spatially normalized thickness maps. Whole cortical volume was also computed from the transformed cortical mask for each subject.

### *Measuring ROI-based Volume*

Regional volumes were measured using a fully automated, atlas-based segmentation method. Briefly, ROI labels from a parcellated atlas were mapped to each subject image volume in native space by nonlinear registration (Collins, 1995).

### **Statistics and Analysis**

Statistical analysis was performed using GraphPad Prism Software (<http://www.graphpad.com/scientific-software/prism/>). ROI-based measures from the left and right hemispheres were combined, and quantitative results are expressed as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation of the effect of interest. Specifically, a Student's two-tailed t-tests were used for group comparisons. The data was adjusted for multiple comparisons using the Bonferroni correction and  $p < 0.05$  was considered significant.

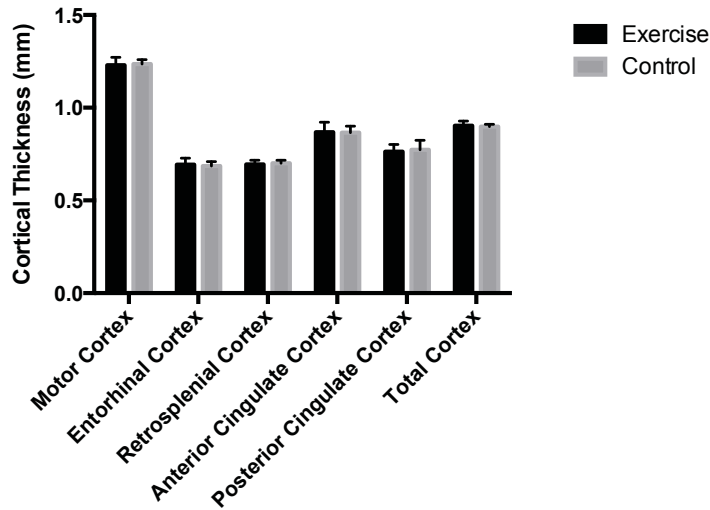
## **Results:**

3-month old male CD1 mice (EX, n = 15) were trained on a 5-lane treadmill at escalating weekly speeds to induce structural changes detectable by MRI. Volume and cortical thickness measurements were compared to a sedentary control (SC, n = 12) that experienced no added training or handling. All animals were scanned at 3-months for baseline comparison. After 6 weeks of treadmill training, all mice were scanned again, and neuroanatomic volume and cortical thickness were measured for multiple regions for comparison.

### *Longitudinal cortical thickness measurements from CD1 mice*

The initial investigation into structural changes following forced treadmill was to examine cortical thickness changes in regions associated with learning and exercise. From the cortical mask aligned to each subject, we attained mean cortical thickness from each of the predetermined ROIs. Examination and statistical testing on these measurements revealed no significant distinctions between exercised mice and sedentary controls (**Fig. 1**). These results indicate that 6 weeks of forced treadmill had no significant effect on cortical thickness compared to sedentary controls.





**Figure. 1.** Regional MRI cortical thickness measures from 3-month old male CD1 mice following 6 weeks of forced treadmill.

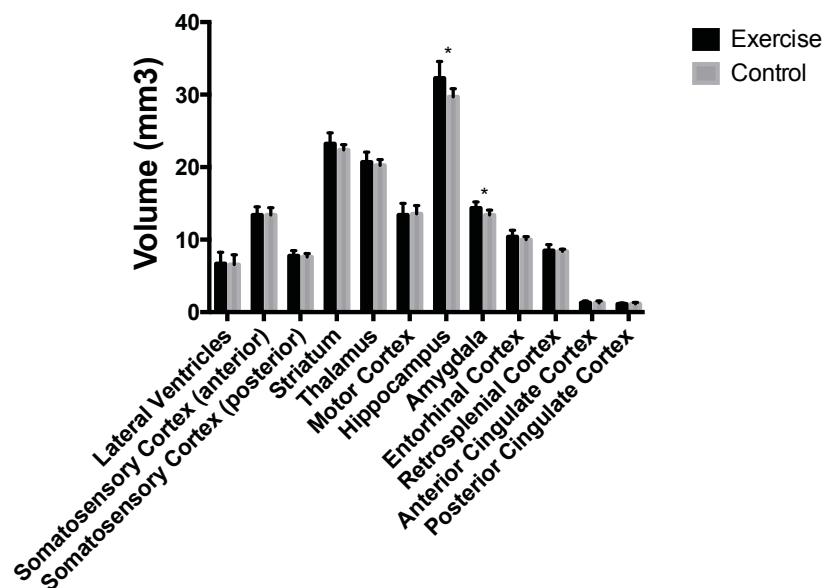
No differences were found between exercised mice and controls at  $p < 0.05$  significance.

#### *Longitudinal volume measurements from CD1 mice*

The next investigation to discover if 6 weeks of forced treadmill influenced brain structure measured the total volume of 12 regions, specifically: Lateral Ventricles, Striatum, Thalamus, Hippocampus, Amygdala, Motor Cortex, Entorhinal Cortex, Retrosplenial Cortex, Anterior Cingulate Cortex, Posterior Cingulate Cortex, Somatosensory Cortex 1, and Somatosensory Cortex 2 (**Table. 1 + Fig. 2**). This analysis revealed a significant increase of total volume in both the amygdala ( $t(24) = 3.059$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ) and hippocampus ( $t(24) = 3.417$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ) within the EX group compared to SC, after an unpaired, two tailed t-test corrected for multiple comparisons. No other regions were significant at  $p < 0.05$ .

Regions	Grouping	Baseline Volume (mm <sup>3</sup> )	Post Exercise Volume (mm <sup>3</sup> )	t Value (EX vs. SC, Post Exercise)	Corrected p-value
Lateral Ventricles	Exercise Group	5.89	6.6	0.24	0.82
	Sedentary Control	6.61	6.55		
Somatosensory 1	Exercise Group	13.77	13.4	0.02	0.98
	Sedentary Control	14.25	13.4		
Somatosensory 2	Exercise Group	8.5	7.76	0.56	0.58
	Sedentary Control	8.07	7.61		
Striatum	Exercise Group	22.3	23.21	1.72	0.1
	Sedentary Control	21.7	22.36		
Thalamus	Exercise Group	20.17	20.7	1	0.33
	Sedentary Control	19.84	20.24		
Motor Cortex	Exercise Group	13.95	13.4	0.25	0.8
	Sedentary Control	13.65	13.55		
Hippocampus	Exercise Group	28.37	32.27	3.42	0.012*
	Sedentary Control	28.51	29.7		
Amygdala	Exercise Group	13.54	14.34	3.06	0.03*
	Sedentary Control	13.58	13.39		
Entorhinal Cortex	Exercise Group	10.22	10.38	1.32	0.2
	Sedentary Control	10	9.98		
Retrosplenial Cortex	Exercise Group	8.46	8.82	0.45	0.65
	Sedentary Control	8.69	8.38		
Anterior Cingulate Cortex	Exercise Group	1.22	1.28	0.27	0.79
	Sedentary Control	1.19	1.25		
Posterior Cingulate Cortex	Exercise Group	1.23	1.12	0.39	0.69
	Sedentary Control	1.25	1.15		
Total Intracranial Volume	Exercise Group	509.8	536.64	1.47	0.16
	Sedentary Control	508.4	519.3		

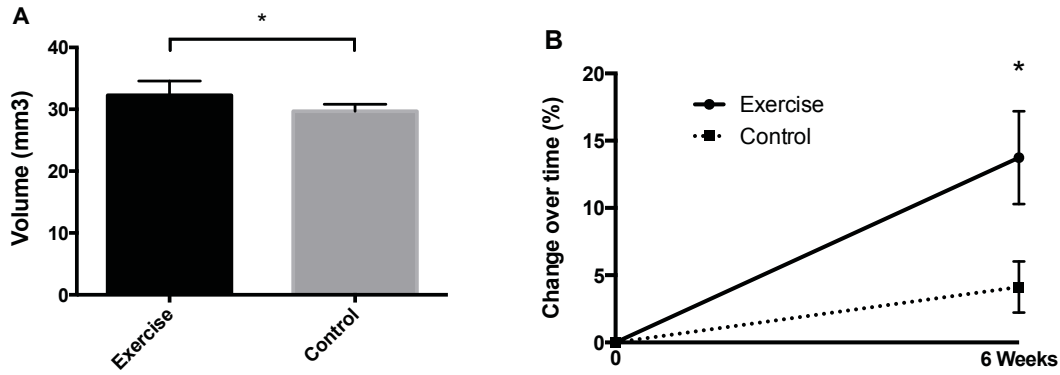
**Table. 1.** Volume data from all regions and groups. An unpaired T-test was performed on post exercise values (EX vs. SC) to compare volume change following 6 weeks of treadmill or no exercise. Corrected  $p < 0.05$  was considered significant.



**Figure. 2.** Regional MRI volume measures from 3-month old male CD1 mice following 6 weeks of forced treadmill (exercise) and sedentary controls (controls). Both the amygdala ( $t(24) = 3.059$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ) and hippocampus ( $t(24) = 3.417$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ) had increased total volume after correcting for multiple comparisons. \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ .

### *Volume measurements of hippocampus in mice after forced treadmill*

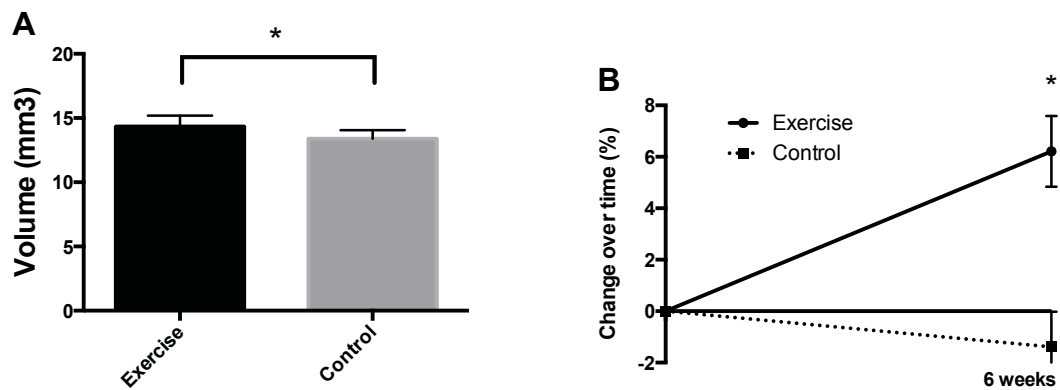
Analysis of the hippocampus revealed a significant increase in volume ( $t(24) = 3.417$ ,  $p = 0.013$ ) of mice following 6 weeks of forced treadmill compared to sedentary controls (**Fig. 3**). Mean hippocampal volume measured at baseline was  $28.37\text{mm}^3$  in EX group. Measurements following exercise revealed an increase of  $3.9\text{mm}^3$  to  $32.27$ , or a 13.7% increase in volume from baseline. Controls increased from  $28.51\text{mm}^3$  at baseline to  $29.7$ , an increase of  $1.19\text{mm}^3$ , a 4.1% increase.



**Figure 3.** Raw MRI volume measures of hippocampus (A) and % change over time (B) from 3-month old male CD1 mice following 6 weeks of forced treadmill (exercise) and sedentary controls (controls). \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ .

#### *Volume Measurements of amygdala in mice after forced treadmill*

Analysis of the amygdala complex revealed a significant increase in volume ( $t(24) = 3.059$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ) of mice following 6 weeks of forced treadmill compared to sedentary controls (**Fig. 4**). Mean amygdala volume measured at baseline was  $28.52\text{mm}^3$  in SC group, which increased by  $1.17\text{mm}^3$  to  $29.69\text{mm}^3$ , or a 4.1% increase in volume following a 6-week sedentary period. Controls showed a decrease in volume from  $13.58$  to  $13.39\text{mm}^3$  after 6 weeks or a loss of 1.4%.



**Figure 4.** Raw MRI volume measures of amygdala complex (A) and % change over time (B) from 3-month old male CD1 mice following 6 weeks of forced treadmill (exercise) and sedentary controls (controls). \* indicates  $p < 0.05$ .

## **Discussion:**

### *Exercise induces large structural volume changes*

These results establish that forced treadmill at escalating speeds can induce an MRI detectable reorganization in brain structure in mice. Six weeks of forced treadmill led to a 9.6% increase in hippocampal volume over sedentary controls and a 7.6% larger increase in volume of the amygdala over controls, which showed a non-significant reduction in volume from baseline. Despite these large alterations in brain shape, no significant decrease in total intracranial volume was discovered, nor a volumetric decrease in any of the examined regions, suggesting this increase may have been compensated for globally in small cellular changes. Such significant increases in volume were unexpected as evidence previous characterized increases less than 2% in humans following exercise (Erickson 2011).

### *Exercise induced no detectable change in cortical thickness*

There are numerous studies observing an increase in angiogenesis within the motor cortical regions following exercise (Swain, 2003; Kleim, 2002, Van Praag, 2005). We were interested in investigating whether this increase in vasculature was affecting the thickness of the cortex within regions associated with exercise and training. Of the 6 regions chosen, no change in thickness was measured from baseline. Finding no change in thickness conflicts with Anderson et al., that found female rats given voluntary access to wheel running increased cortical thickness in a small region of the motor cortex (Anderson et al. 2002). This conflict is likely due to differences in methodology, as they

performed thickness measurements on post mortem sliced and stained tissue that, rather than MRI and cortical masking. Measuring thickness on post mortem tissue that has been sliced, processed and stained often distorts and reshapes the tissue, allowing for more inaccurate measurements. The effect differences between using wheel vs. treadmill likely had a large impact, as well as using females vs. males or rats vs. mice.

### *Cellular physiology underlying volume change in hippocampus*

We are currently performing histological investigation to uncover the cellular changes associated with the increase in hippocampal volume. A large number of studies have observed changes in the hippocampus following various methods of exercise (Erickson, 2010; Van Praag, 1999; Van Praag, 2005; Kitamura, 2003; O'Callaghan, 2007; Adlard, 2004; Adlard, 2005; Liu, 2009; Neeper, 1996). Hippocampal changes in animals following one week or more of wheel running or forced treadmill include an increase in neurogenesis (Van praag, 1995; Van praag, 2005; Kitamura, 2003), enhanced LTP (O'Callaghan, 2007), increased BDNF (Liu, 2009; Adlard, 2005; Kitamura, 2003; Neeper, 1996; Berchtold, 2005), increased glutamate receptors (Lou, 2008; Kitamura, 2003; Dietrich, 2005; Farmer, 2004), increases in dendritic and axonal remodeling (Lin, 2012; Olson, 2006), and gliogenesis (Li, 2005; Ehniger, 2003). Increases in BDNF within the hippocampus following exercise correlate highly with increased neurogenesis in the dentate gyrus as well as better performance in memory tasks (Van praag, 2005; O'Callaghan, 2007; Liu, 2009). BDNF, injected directly into the dentate gyrus increases neurogenesis (Scharfman, 2005). Cultured hippocampal neurons that receive acute and gradual increases in BDNF result in neurite branching and dendritic spine development,

through the activation of its trkB receptor pathway. Damage that occurs in the hippocampus following chronic periods of stress is also mediated through the actions of glucocorticoids on BDNF (Schaaf, 1998). These observations led us to believe the volume increase observed within the hippocampus is likely due to an increase in expression of BDNF following regular exercise. BDNF is shown to increase neurogenesis (Sharfman, 2005) and dendritic remodeling in the hippocampus, through an activity-dependent mechanism (Kellner, 2014). This activity-dependent increase in BDNF within the hippocampus can be mediated by glutamate signaling through the phospholipase C signaling pathways (Canossa, 2001). Glutamate activation is shown to directly stimulate BDNF in hippocampal neurons, providing a mechanism for activity-dependent BDNF release (Hartmann, 2001). Glutamate receptors and mediators, such as GluR1, GluR2/3, SAP-97 and GRIP-1 are increased in mouse cortical tissue following exercise (Dietrich, 2005; Real, 2010), and forced treadmill directly enhanced LTP in the dentate gyrus (O'Callaghan, 2007) and increased NMDAR1 mRNA expression in the hippocampus, which was directly associated with enhanced BDNF expression (Lou, 2008). Taken together, it appears long-term exercise training may trigger large changes of glutamate signaling in the hippocampus, enhancing LTP and synaptic remodeling. This increased glutamate signaling increases BDNF within the hippocampus, increasing neurogenesis, axonal and dendritic remodeling and spine density. It is possible that through these actions, exercise is increasing hippocampal volume.

*Cellular physiology underlying volume change in amygdala*

The volume increase within the amygdala complex following forced treadmill is due most likely to the effects of stress/fear rather than through training. Direct comparisons between forced treadmill and voluntary wheel running indicate the treadmill provides a larger stress and fear component, due likely to the shock received for noncompliance and the absence of choice. Wheel access provides an enrichment novelty that mice have freedom to utilize, whereas the treadmill is a forced activity. Both wheel running and treadmill improve performance in water maze tasks, as well as enhanced expression of BDNF-trkB signaling within the hippocampus, but only the treadmill improved performance on the passive/avoidance test (Liu, 2009), which involves shocking an animal as it moves from a brightly lit chamber to darkness, then measuring its latency to enter the darkness upon testing after an extended period. This test is recognized as measuring fear memory. As well, only treadmill enhanced BDNF-trkB signaling in the amygdala (Liu, 2009). If forced treadmill is viewed as a model of fear conditioning, a mechanism for amygdala growth becomes clear. Fear conditioning induces behavioral LTP in the amygdala (Rattiner, 2005). As well, BDNF mRNA expression is elevated in the basolateral amygdala in the period just following fear conditioning (Rattiner, 2004). Volume growth within the amygdala complex following forced treadmill is likely a reflection of enhanced synaptic activity and BDNF expression due to fear learning, leading to increased dendritic spine density and neurite growth. It would not be expected that hippocampal growth was due to a fear conditioning as chronic restraint stress simultaneously increases dendritic spine density and growth in the basolateral amygdala (BLA) while causing dendritic atrophy within the hippocampus (Lakshminarasimhan, 2012). Consideration of fear conditioning as a cause of amygdala increase should be



noted as conflicting to hippocampal findings as fear conditioning leads to atrophy within the hippocampus (Lakshminarasimhan, 2012). These findings of chronic restraint stress were also associated with an increase in BDNF in the BLA, and reduced BDNF in the hippocampus (Lakshminarasimhan, 2012).

### **Current/Future Work**

The work described here indicates that 6 weeks of forced treadmill induces a nearly 10% larger increase in hippocampal volume and nearly a 6% larger increase in amygdala volume compared to sedentary controls. Evidence suggests this growth may be due to glutamate signaling, LTP enhancement and BDNF expression within the regions, leading to increased neurogenesis, neurite remodeling and an increase in dendritic spine density. Histological investigation is on going to confirm or reject this speculation.

Using the template created by averaging all the MRI sections from all mice, we can reconstruct stained sections to fit within the regions structurally altered and quantify all markers within. Immunostaining and 3D reconstruction of stained sections for stereology may indicate how these volume changes are occurring structurally. Markers of neuronal density such as the neuronal nuclear antigen NeuN, for astrocytosis using glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) and neuronal morphology like GAP43, an axonal growth cone can be stained for and reconstructed to count total signal within a single region such as the complete hippocampus. Markers for glutamate receptors, BDNF and trkB and plasticity can be measured as well to reveal how these structural changes are mediated.

Having established that exercise from forced treadmill at escalating speeds can induce a structural brain change, this platform can be used to understand how the brain structurally reorganizes in various transgenic models and circumstances.

#### *Forced treadmill on aging and cognitively impaired mice*

The forced treadmill platform will be utilized to understand how exercise influences brain structure in an aging mouse model with amyloidosis to investigate how Alzheimer's disease might affect plasticity and training. Twenty-nine male mice aged 10 – 12 months, with an overexpression of the Swedish (670/671KM→NL) and Indiana (717V→F) mutations of human APP will be scanned at baseline and trained under the same treadmill protocol as the CD1 mice to induce structural changes in the brain. Following training, all mice will be scanned again and sacrificed to analyze for volume and cortical thickness measures, corresponding histology and 3D reconstruction for stereology as previously described. By understanding how aged animals with amyloidosis are being affected by exercise, we can observe how structural plasticity changes over time and how it is affected under pathological circumstances.

#### *Forced treadmill on Brainbow mice*

An interesting model to investigate how forced treadmill effects neural pathways and specific cell types is the Brainbow mouse. Developed by the labs of Jeff Lichtman and Joshua Sanes at Harvard, the Brainbow mouse was first presented in a 2007 Nature paper (Livet, 2007). Brainbow mice utilize the Cre-Lox recombination to splice specifically

targeted DNA sections, inserting randomly arranged fluorescent protein genes that are divided by loxP sites. In the presence of the Cre recombinase, this inserted transgene undergoes an excision event that promotes expression of these fluorescent genes. These sites have multiple copies of the transgene allowing for each neuron to express one of a wide variety of fluorescent combinations and emit a distinctive hue (Livet, 2007). The ability to fluorescently label neuron types in mice that are forced to run at escalating speeds would allow us to visualize the distinct changes in neural pathways associated with structural reorganization of the brain.

#### *Platforms for inducing structural change*

Forced treadmill requires little behavioral training and cognitive functioning for the mouse. Most mice adapt to the 60-minute protocol within the first 10 days and maintain a consistent pace through the 6-week experimental period. This simplistic training may limit the amount of tissue structurally affected. To investigate how other regions are reorganized structurally, it is necessary to train under different protocols that utilize more or specialized brain functioning.

The Barnes maze can be utilized to measure spatial learning and memory and how the brain reshapes in response to a more cognitive task. Mice are placed in the center of a large circular field with bright lights above and 20 indentions surrounding the circumference. One of these 20 indentions opens to a dark chamber where the mouse can escape the light, as mice are nocturnal and bright lighting is a strong aversion.

Navigational markers are placed on walls surrounding the table to provide the mouse

with spatial cues. Latency to find the dark chamber is measured and shorter durations are accepted as learning the maze. Training on the Barnes maze targets more cognitive and spatial mapping regions of the brain and are likelier to induce structural changes in regions more associated with spatial memory and learning, as well as having a more global effect on the brain as the animal attempts to ‘solve’ a task under aversive pressure.

Environmental Enrichment was the first assay used to analyze structural brain changes and could be a valuable tool for inducing changes in cortical structure (Diamond, 2001). In the 1960’s, Marion Diamond and colleagues revealed that rats living under enriched conditions for 30 days had greater cortical thickness than rats in standard or impoverished living conditions (Krech, 1960). Environmental enrichment was defined as 12 animals living together in a large cage that contained 5 – 6 objects to play with or climb upon (e.g., wheels, ladders, small mazes). These objects were changed twice a week to maintain novelty (Krech, 1960). These were compared to standard housing conditions with three animals to a small cage with no objects and impoverished conditions with a single housed animal with no objects. Under these conditions, environmental enrichment led to an increase in cortical thickness globally which was associated to increased nerve cell size, dendritic lengthening and an increase in dendritic spine density (Krech, 1960). Environmental enrichment has also been associated with increased astrocytosis (Ehniger, 2003), improved spatial memory and maze performance (Leggio, 2005), dendritic spine development (Leggio, 2005; Mora, 2007), improved outcomes for many diseases

affecting the nervous system (Nithianantharajah, 2006) and a decrease in spontaneous apoptosis within the hippocampus (Young, 1999). Enrichment has long lasting, global effects, but little is known about the cellular physiology underlying these structural changes. Early studies measured a change in cortical thickness as measured by analyzing stained tissue on slides. This assay could be used to induce structural reorganization in the cortex that could be measured *in vivo* with more accurate MRI technology and histological 3D reconstruction for cellular analysis to better understand how the environment effects neurophysiology.

### **Conclusion**

In this investigation, it was shown that 6 weeks of forced treadmill at escalating speeds led to an increase of almost 10% in hippocampal volume and an increase of almost 6% in amygdala volume compared to sedentary controls. Ongoing histological investigation will reveal the cellular changes that occurred with these increases in volume. The significance of these investigations will become clearer once the cellular physiology is revealed. Studies like these advance techniques in noninvasive examination within living animals. Studies performed non-invasively *in vivo* have great potential in a clinical setting. Development of these tools improves diagnoses and aids in the understanding of how disease begins and manifests, which can lead to early prevention methods for neurological disorders such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, Multiple Sclerosis and various brain related cancers. With a better understanding of structural reorganization in response to the environment, we gain insight into cognition and how the human brain has evolved into the most complex object in the known universe.

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