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ENDOCRINE RESPONSES TO EXTREME ENVIRONMENTAL STRESSORS

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Abstract

A critical review of contemporary scientific literature provides insight into current understandings of the functional alterations occurring within endocrine regulatory systems under the influence of diverse environmental stressors. Numerous studies indicate that the **hypothalamic–pituitary–gonadal (HPG) axis and the thyroid axis**, in conjunction with the **sympathoadrenal system and the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis**, represent key regulatory pathways involved in the organism's response to extreme environmental conditions and adaptive physiological processes. These interconnected endocrine systems participate in maintaining internal stability through coordinated hormonal responses. In the context of systemic homeostasis, fluctuations in hormonal secretion are manifested as a complex cascade of tightly integrated regulatory reactions that collectively ensure adaptive responses to external stress factors. Such endocrine adjustments play a critical role in coordinating metabolic regulation, neuroendocrine signaling, and adaptive physiological mechanisms necessary for survival under stress conditions. Despite significant advances in the field of endocrinology, the comprehensive elucidation of these regulatory mechanisms and their contribution to the pathogenesis of stress-induced disorders remains a major challenge in contemporary biomedical science. Further investigation of these processes is essential for improving the scientific basis of preventive and therapeutic approaches aimed at mitigating stress-related pathological conditions.

Keywords

endocrine regulation, stress response, physiological adaptation, hypothalamic–pituitary axes, homeostasis

Introduction. The endocrine system plays a crucial role in regulating compensatory mechanisms that respond to various extreme factors affecting the organism. Alterations in hormonal secretion determine the adequacy and characteristics of adaptive responses that ensure the restoration and maintenance of the body's internal homeostasis [1,2]. The functional activity of any endocrine gland depends on the concentration of its hormone secreted and circulating in peripheral tissues, which forms the fundamental principle of homeostatic regulation in endocrine organs [3,4]. Excessive elevation of hormone levels in the peripheral circulation inhibits the activity of trophic cells in the hypothalamus and pituitary gland, leading to a decrease in the secretion of stimulating tropic hormones. This regulatory process represents the classical **negative feedback mechanism** that governs endocrine system function [5]. Various types of extreme environmental or physiological stressors activate compensatory and adaptive mechanisms within the organism, resulting in corresponding changes in metabolism and in the functional state of organs and tissues. A single or short-term exposure to such factors generally does not cause stable alterations in the regulatory mechanisms of homeostasis. However, prolonged or repeated stress exposure may become a basis for the development of **stress-induced pathological conditions**

[6]. It is well established that one of the principal endocrine responses to external stressors involves activation of the **sympathoadrenal system** and the **hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis**, which play a key role in the formation of adaptive reactions in the organism [7,8]. At the same time, other components of endocrine regulation, including the **gonadal** and **thyroid systems**, also contribute significantly to ensuring an adequate adaptive response of the organism to stress stimuli [9,10].

Stress-Induced Responses of the Sympathoadrenal and Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal Systems in Endocrine Regulation

The sympathoadrenal system represents one of the primary components of endocrine regulation involved in the physiological response to stress. Its main biologically active mediators include catecholamines and serotonin-like substances, which play an important role in regulating energy metabolism and facilitating short-term adaptive responses. Catecholamines are generally considered part of the **stress-realizing mechanisms**, whereas serotonin is associated with **stress-limiting processes**. An imbalance between the secretion of these mediators may act as a pathogenetic factor that disrupts the effective implementation of adaptive responses. Another key regulatory pathway is the **hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis**, which includes corticotropin-releasing hormones, adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH), and glucocorticoids. This system primarily supports mechanisms of **long-term adaptation** within the organism. Prolonged exposure to harmful environmental factors may lead to functional disturbances in these regulatory pathways. The major manifestations of excessive activation of these systems include hypersecretion of biologically active substances, the development of cellular resistance in target tissues, and disruption of feedback regulation mechanisms. From a physiological perspective, each stress stimulus triggers a complex **neuroendocrine response** aimed at overcoming extraordinary environmental or internal challenges. The sympathoadrenal system and the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis form a **nonspecific adaptive response**, representing universal regulatory elements activated by a wide variety of stressors. Nevertheless, the nature of the stressor, the individual perception of the stress situation, and behavioral coping strategies contribute to the presence of **specific components in the stress response**. Exposure to a stressor stimulates the hypothalamus to release **corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH)**, which enhances the secretion of adrenocorticotropic hormone from the anterior pituitary gland and subsequently increases glucocorticoid production in the adrenal cortex. At the same time, the psychological perception of stress may activate CRH-mediated pathways within the amygdala complex. Thus, CRH plays a central role during the early stages of stress development, initiating a cascade of biochemical reactions and coordinating further adaptive processes through interactions with various hormonal and neurotransmitter systems involved in both stress-activating and stress-limiting responses. Adrenocorticotropic hormone is a peptide produced by the anterior pituitary in response to stimulation by corticotropin-releasing hormone. The release of ACTH can be further enhanced by other hypothalamic hormones, including vasopressin. The activity of these regulatory pathways is influenced by several biologically active substances such as acetylcholine, catecholamines, dopamine, serotonin, and cytokines. In peripheral tissues, the adrenal cortex serves as the principal effector organ for ACTH. Under ACTH stimulation, the adrenal cortex synthesizes and secretes glucocorticoids and, to a lesser extent, mineralocorticoids and adrenal androgens. The final hormonal products of the HPA axis, namely **glucocorticoids**, play a central modulatory role during stress conditions by bringing the organism into a

physiological state most suitable for adaptation to the stressful situation. These hormones regulate numerous central and peripheral physiological functions. Within the central nervous system, glucocorticoids suppress CRH production through negative feedback mechanisms. Their metabolic effects involve preparing the organism for the mobilization of energy resources by influencing carbohydrate, lipid, protein, and electrolyte metabolism. In addition, glucocorticoids regulate cellular differentiation and development, modulate gene expression, and exert significant regulatory effects on immune responses and various physiological reactions triggered by external stimuli. Balanced activation of **stress-realizing systems** (such as the sympathoadrenal system and the HPA axis) and **stress-limiting systems** (including dopaminergic, serotonergic, and antioxidant mechanisms) is essential for the development of an adequate adaptive response to external environmental influences.

Stress-Induced Responses of the Hypothalamic–Pituitary–Gonadal AxisEndocrine regulation of reproductive function is primarily mediated by the **hypothalamic–pituitary–gonadal (HPG) axis**. The central regulatory component operates at both the hypothalamic and pituitary levels. At the hypothalamic level, gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) and dopamine play key regulatory roles, while at the pituitary level, reproductive function is controlled through the secretion of **luteinizing hormone (LH), follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH), and prolactin**. The peripheral component of this axis consists of steroid-producing endocrine organs, including the **gonads and adrenal glands**, which synthesize and secrete the primary sex steroid hormones such as **testosterone, estradiol, and progesterone**. In turn, the secretion of gonadotropin-releasing hormones is regulated by various neuroamines, including **norepinephrine, serotonin, and acetylcholine**, as well as by circulating levels of sex steroid hormones in the bloodstream [22]. Beyond its principal function in regulating reproductive processes, the hypothalamic–pituitary–gonadal axis also plays a significant role in the organism's **adaptive responses to environmental stressors**. Alterations in the biosynthesis, secretion, and circulating levels of HPG axis hormones in response to extreme environmental influences have important physiological implications for maintaining an appropriate adaptive response [23]. The HPG axis maintains a close functional interaction with the **hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis**. Activation of the HPA axis during stress exerts a direct regulatory influence on the HPG axis, establishing reciprocal interactions between these two endocrine systems [24]. Conversely, sex steroid hormones have been shown to modulate the activity of key neurotransmitters, including **norepinephrine, dopamine, and serotonin**. The coordinated actions of monoamines and sex steroids regulate the cyclic centers responsible for the secretion and release of gonadotropins. This regulatory interaction forms the physiological basis for adaptive behavioral responses, including **reproductive, feeding, and defensive-aggressive behaviors**, which are closely associated with stress responses [25]. Therefore, both **synergistic and antagonistic interactions** between the HPG and HPA axes play a critical role in determining alterations in reproductive function and the overall adaptive capacity of the organism under stress conditions [26].

Stress-Related Responses of the Hypothalamic–Pituitary–Thyroid Axis

Thyroid hormones, primarily **thyroxine (T4)** and **triiodothyronine (T3)**, exert a wide range of physiological effects in the organism. These hormones play an essential role in **growth and development, tissue differentiation, metabolic regulation, energy homeostasis, and the maintenance of functional activity of multiple physiological systems**. Furthermore, thyroid hormones are critically involved in the development of adaptive responses that enable the organism to respond effectively to environmental challenges and stress conditions. The diverse

biological effects of thyroid hormones are largely explained by the presence of **specific cellular receptors in nearly all tissues and organs**. These receptors demonstrate high specificity for both T4 and T3, indicating that thyroxine occupies an important biological role within hormonal regulation systems rather than functioning solely as a transport form or prohormone for T3. Triiodothyronine primarily exerts its biological effects at the **genomic level**, where it interacts with nuclear receptors bound to DNA. Through this interaction, T3 stimulates transcriptional activity and promotes the synthesis of RNA and protein enzymes involved in essential metabolic processes. These mechanisms are particularly important during stress, where cellular proliferation, differentiation, and metabolic adaptation depend on the regulatory actions of thyroid hormones. One of the most significant physiological effects of thyroid hormones is their **permissive role in enhancing tissue sensitivity to catecholamines**. Both T3 and T4 increase the responsiveness of adrenergic receptors to norepinephrine and epinephrine and can increase the density of certain adrenergic receptors on cell membranes. This interaction contributes to the integrated endocrine response to stress. Changes in thyroid regulation are closely interconnected with the **hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA)** and **hypothalamic–pituitary–gonadal (HPG)** axes. A probable explanation for this interaction is the existence of common central regulatory mechanisms within the hypothalamus and pituitary gland. The activity of thyroid, adrenal, and reproductive endocrine systems is controlled by trophic hormones produced by the anterior pituitary. However, **thyrotropin-releasing hormone (TRH)** produced in the hypothalamus is capable of stimulating not only thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) secretion but also influencing the release of ACTH, gonadotropins, and prolactin. Therefore, TRH may function as a **general regulatory mediator of trophic cells in the anterior pituitary**.

The physiological effects of thyroid hormones on various endocrine regulatory pathways largely depend on their concentration. Within normal physiological ranges, thyroxine stimulates the synthesis of **sex steroid hormones in the gonads**. In contrast, hyperthyroxinemia suppresses testosterone synthesis in gonadal tissues while simultaneously increasing steroidogenesis, including sex steroid production, in the adrenal glands. Under such conditions, increased **aromatization of testosterone** may lead to elevated estradiol concentrations and reduced circulating testosterone levels. At the same time, progesterone levels may increase due to enhanced conversion of cholesterol into pregnenolone. These hormonal changes are believed to occur through synergistic interactions involving prolactin and luteinizing hormone, whose secretion levels are elevated in this context. Conversely, decreased thyroid hormone levels can reduce the biosynthesis of sex steroid hormones, primarily through inhibitory effects on hypothalamic regulatory mechanisms associated with the suppression of gonadotropin-releasing hormones. Alterations in sex steroid hormone levels also exert significant biological effects on the thyroid gland itself. The mechanisms through which different sex steroids influence thyroid regulation are not identical. For example, elevated testosterone levels can stimulate thyroxine production directly at the level of the thyroid gland, bypassing the hypothalamic–pituitary regulatory pathway, because thyroid tissue contains **testosterone-sensitive receptors**. Increased testosterone levels may also accelerate the conversion of thyroxine into triiodothyronine through activation of **iodothyronine deiodinase enzymes**.

Elevated estrogen levels exert a strong stimulatory effect on the biosynthesis of thyroid hormones through both **central (hypothalamic–pituitary)** and **peripheral mechanisms**. Experimental studies have demonstrated that hyperestrogenemia increases the sensitivity of pituitary thyrotrophs to thyrotropin-releasing hormone. At the same time, elevated estradiol levels can increase serum thyroid hormone concentrations through enhanced receptor activation

within thyroid tissue. Various physiological and pathological conditions associated with alterations in the activity of **stress-regulating systems**, including acute and chronic stress, post-traumatic stress disorders, and changes in physical workload, can significantly influence the functioning of the **hypothalamic–pituitary–thyroid (HPT) axis**. During short-term adaptive responses, serotonin exerts an inhibitory effect on the secretion of thyrotropin-releasing hormone and consequently on thyroid-stimulating hormone release, whereas norepinephrine demonstrates a stimulatory influence. Conversely, thyroid hormones themselves may reduce the synthesis of serotonin and norepinephrine, reflecting complex bidirectional regulatory interactions. Moreover, elevated ACTH levels and increased cortisol secretion during prolonged stress conditions may lead to suppression of thyroid hormone production, particularly a reduction in circulating thyroxine levels.

Conclusion

Analysis of current scientific literature indicates that hormones associated with the **hypothalamic–pituitary–gonadal and hypothalamic–pituitary–thyroid axes**, together with the **sympathoadrenal system and hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis**, play a crucial role in the organism's response to extreme environmental influences and in the formation of adaptive mechanisms. Within the regulatory mechanisms of homeostasis, stress-induced hormonal alterations represent a complex cascade of tightly interconnected endocrine reactions. Dysfunction within any regulatory component activates compensatory mechanisms and reserve capacities of the organism. Understanding these mechanisms and their role in the pathogenesis of stress-related disorders remains a fundamental problem in biomedical research. Clarification of these processes may contribute to the development of improved preventive and therapeutic strategies for diseases in which stress plays a significant pathogenic role. Furthermore, the development and application of pharmacological agents capable of enhancing adaptive responses to damaging environmental factors and maintaining key homeostatic parameters may significantly increase the effectiveness of therapeutic interventions. Such approaches could promote a disease course that more closely resembles natural adaptive physiological processes.

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