

Neuron

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UG - Semester - 06

MJC – 11 (Practical)

Neuron

1. Introduction

A **neuron** is the basic structural and functional unit of the nervous system. In psychology, especially in biological and physiological psychology, the neuron is extremely important because all thoughts, emotions, behaviors, learning, and memory depend upon the functioning of neurons. The human brain contains approximately 86 billion neurons, each connected to thousands of other neurons, forming a complex communication network.

The scientific understanding of neurons developed mainly through the work of **Santiago Ramón y Cajal**, who proposed the *Neuron Doctrine*. According to this doctrine, the nervous system is made up of individual cells called neurons, and these cells communicate with each other but are not physically continuous.

2. Definition

A neuron is a specialized nerve cell that receives, processes, and transmits information through electrical impulses and chemical signals within the nervous system.

3. Structure of a Neuron

A neuron has several important parts:

(1) Cell Body (Soma)

The cell body contains the nucleus and cytoplasm. It maintains the life of the neuron and controls its activities. The nucleus carries genetic material and regulates cell functions.

(2) Dendrites

Dendrites are short, branch-like extensions from the cell body. Their main function is to receive signals from other neurons and carry those signals toward the cell body.

(3) Axon

The axon is a long, thin fiber that carries impulses away from the cell body to other neurons, muscles, or glands. Some axons are very short, while others can be several feet long.

(4) Myelin Sheath

Many axons are covered with a fatty insulating layer called the myelin sheath. It increases the speed of impulse transmission. The gaps between the myelin sheath are called Nodes of Ranvier.

(5) Axon Terminals

These are small branches at the end of the axon that release chemicals called neurotransmitters.

4. Synapse and Neurotransmission

The **synapse** is the small gap between two neurons. Communication between neurons occurs through neurotransmitters.

Process of Transmission:

1. An electrical impulse (action potential) travels down the axon.
2. The impulse reaches the axon terminal.
3. Neurotransmitters are released into the synaptic cleft.
4. These chemicals bind to receptors on the next neuron.
5. A new electrical impulse is generated.

This process is known as **neurotransmission**.

5. Types of Neurons

Neurons are classified into three main types:

(1) Sensory Neurons (Afferent Neurons)

- Carry information from sense organs to the brain and spinal cord.
- Help us feel pain, heat, cold, sound, and light.

(2) Motor Neurons (Efferent Neurons)

- Carry information from the brain and spinal cord to muscles and glands.
- Responsible for voluntary and involuntary movements.

(3) Interneurons

- Found in the brain and spinal cord.
- Connect sensory and motor neurons.
- Responsible for higher mental functions like thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving.

6. Electrical Activity of Neuron

Neurons communicate using electrical signals.

(1) Resting Potential

When a neuron is not transmitting a signal, it is in a resting state. The inside of the neuron is negatively charged compared to the outside.

(2) Action Potential

When stimulated, the neuron generates an electrical impulse called an action potential. It follows the **all-or-none principle**, meaning it either fires completely or does not fire at all.

7. Neurotransmitters

Neurotransmitters are chemical messengers that transmit signals across the synapse.

Important neurotransmitters include:

- **Dopamine** – pleasure, motivation
- **Serotonin** – mood regulation
- **Acetylcholine** – learning and memory
- **Norepinephrine** – alertness and arousal
- **GABA** – calming effect

Imbalances in neurotransmitters can lead to psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia.

8. Functions of Neurons in Psychology

Neurons are responsible for:

1. Learning

Learning occurs when new neural connections are formed. This ability of the brain to change is called neuroplasticity.

2. Memory

Memory depends on strengthening or weakening of synaptic connections.

3. Emotion

Emotional reactions are controlled by neural circuits in the brain.

4. Thinking and Intelligence

Complex networks of neurons in the cerebral cortex help in reasoning, decision-making, and problem-solving.

5. Behavior

All human behaviors are the result of neural activity.

9. Importance of Neuron in Psychology

Understanding neurons helps psychologists:

- Explain human behavior
- Understand mental disorders
- Develop treatments for psychological problems
- Study learning and intelligence
- Understand brain-behavior relationships

Without neurons, there would be no sensation, no thought, no emotion, and no behavior.

10. Conclusion

The neuron is the fundamental unit of the nervous system and the foundation of all psychological processes. It transmits information through electrical and chemical signals, allowing humans to think, feel, learn, and behave. The study of neurons bridges biology and psychology and is essential for understanding human nature.