OPEN ACCESS

Scholars International Journal of Biochemistry

Abbreviated Key Title: Sch Int J Biochem
ISSN 2616-8650 (Print) |ISSN 2617-3476 (Online)
Scholars Middle East Publishers, Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Journal homepage: https://saudijournals.com

Review Article

The NLRP3 Inflammasome and Pro-Inflammatory Cytokines in Alzheimer's Disease: Molecular Mechanisms, Neuroimmune Crosstalk, Biomarkers, and Emerging Therapeutic Perspectives

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.36348/sijb.2026.v09i02.002 | **Received:** 14.06.2026 | **Accepted:** 03.08.2026 | **Published:** 06.08.2026

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Abstract

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder and the leading cause of dementia worldwide, characterized by progressive cognitive decline, memory impairment, and behavioral dysfunction. Despite extensive research, effective disease-modifying therapies remain limited, largely due to incomplete understanding of its complex and multifactorial pathogenesis. Increasing evidence now highlights chronic neuroinflammation as a central contributor to AD progression, shifting focus from a purely proteinopathy-based model toward an integrated neuroimmune perspective. Among key inflammatory pathways, the NLRP3 inflammasome has emerged as a critical innate immune signaling platform that links pathological protein aggregation to sustained neuroinflammatory responses in the central nervous system. Activation of the NLRP3 inflammasome is triggered by multiple Alzheimer's disease–associated pathological stimuli, including amyloid-β accumulation, tau pathology, autophagy dysfunction, mitochondrial impairment, oxidative stress, and endoplasmic reticulum stress. These cellular disturbances converge to promote assembly of the inflammasome complex and activation of caspase-1. Activated caspase-1 mediates the proteolytic maturation and release of the pro-inflammatory cytokines interleukin-1β (IL-1β) and interleukin-18 (IL-18), both of which play central roles in amplifying neuroinflammatory signaling, promoting synaptic dysfunction, and contributing to neuronal injury. Consequently, IL-1β and IL-18 have gained increasing attention as potential biomarkers for disease severity, progression, and inflammatory burden in Alzheimer's disease. In addition, inflammasome-specific markers such as apoptosis-associated speck-like protein containing CARD (ASC) specks provide further mechanistic and diagnostic evidence of active inflammasome signaling in neurodegeneration. Preclinical studies using cellular and animal models have demonstrated that pharmacological inhibition of the NLRP3 inflammasome can reduce neuroinflammation, attenuate neuropathological changes, and improve cognitive performance. However, despite these promising findings, clinical translation remains limited due to challenges including inadequate blood–brain barrier penetration, systemic immune modulation risks, and the absence of reliable biomarker-guided patient stratification strategies. This review critically examines the molecular mechanisms underlying NLRP3 inflammasome activation in Alzheimer's disease, its interaction with pro-inflammatory cytokine networks, and the emerging role of inflammasome-related biomarkers in disease characterization. Furthermore, current therapeutic strategies targeting the NLRP3 pathway are discussed, along with key translational barriers and future directions for developing biomarker-driven immunomodulatory therapies in Alzheimer's disease.

Keywords: Alzheimer's Disease, Neuroinflammation, NLRP3 Inflammasome, IL-1β, IL-18, ASC Specks, Caspase-1, Microglia, Amyloid-β, cytokines, Biomarkers, Therapeutic Targeting.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Alzheimer's Disease: Clinical Overview and Unmet Needs

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a progressive neurodegenerative disorder and the most common cause of dementia worldwide, characterized clinically by gradual cognitive decline, memory impairment, and behavioral dysfunction. Despite decades of extensive research, effective disease-modifying therapies remain limited, highlighting critical gaps in understanding the complex molecular and cellular mechanisms underlying disease onset and progression. This has intensified interest in identifying reliable biomarkers and

therapeutic targets for early diagnosis, disease monitoring, and precision-based intervention strategies.

1.2 Classical Pathology and the Emerging Role of Neuroinflammation

The classical neuropathological hallmarks of AD include extracellular deposition of amyloid-β (Aβ) plaques and intracellular accumulation of neurofibrillary tangles composed of hyperphosphorylated tau protein. While these proteinopathies have historically formed the basis of AD pathology, increasing evidence suggests that they are closely interconnected with chronic neuroinflammatory processes that significantly influence disease initiation, propagation, and severity.

Rather than being passive byproducts of neurodegeneration, Aβ and tau aggregates actively engage innate immune pathways, thereby amplifying inflammatory signaling cascades within the central nervous system. In this context, microglia and astrocytes—key resident immune cells of the brain—play a central role in sustaining chronic neuroinflammation. Under physiological conditions, these glial cells contribute to tissue homeostasis, synaptic pruning, and clearance of cellular debris. However, in Alzheimer's disease, persistent exposure to pathological protein aggregates induces sustained glial activation, resulting in prolonged release of pro-inflammatory mediators that contribute to synaptic dysfunction, neuronal injury, and progressive neurodegeneration.

1.3 The NLRP3 Inflammasome as a Central Immune Signaling Hub

Among the major innate immune pathways implicated in this process, the NLRP3 inflammasome has emerged as a central molecular platform linking amyloid-β and tau pathology to downstream inflammatory signaling. The NLRP3 inflammasome acts as a cytosolic sensor of cellular stress and damage, integrating diverse pathological stimuli associated with Alzheimer's disease into a unified inflammatory response.

Upon activation, it assembles a multiprotein complex that drives caspase-1–dependent cleavage of pro–interleukin-1β (pro–IL-1β) and pro–interleukin-18 (pro–IL-18) into their biologically active forms. These cytokines, IL-1β and IL-18, are key mediators of neuroinflammation and are increasingly recognized as potential biomarkers of disease severity, inflammatory burden, and progression in AD.

1.4 Molecular Dysregulation and Biomarker Relevance of NLRP3 Signaling

Growing genetic, experimental, and translational evidence indicates that dysregulation of the NLRP3 inflammasome pathway plays a significant role in Alzheimer's disease pathophysiology. Persistent activation of this pathway not only sustains chronic cytokine release but also reinforces a self-amplifying inflammatory loop involving microglial activation and neuronal dysfunction.

In parallel, inflammasome-associated components and downstream cytokines are being actively investigated as candidate biomarkers for disease staging, therapeutic response monitoring, and patient stratification in clinical settings. This framework positions innate immune activation as a central bridge between classical proteinopathy and clinical neurodegeneration, integrating molecular pathology with translational biomarker development.

1.5 Scope and Objectives of the Review

Accordingly, this review critically examines the molecular mechanisms underlying NLRP3 inflammasome activation in Alzheimer's disease, with particular emphasis on its interaction with amyloid-β and tau pathology and its role in sustaining pro-inflammatory cytokine networks. Furthermore, we explore the emerging landscape of inflammasome-related biomarkers and evaluate current and prospective therapeutic strategies targeting the NLRP3 signaling axis, while highlighting key translational challenges and future directions for biomarker-driven and mechanism-based therapeutic approaches in Alzheimer's disease.

2. NLRP3 Inflammasome: Structure and Activation Mechanisms

2.1 Innate Immune System and Pattern Recognition Receptors

The innate immune system represents the first and most rapid line of defense against infection and cellular injury, providing immediate protection through conserved molecular sensing mechanisms. It is composed of innate immune cells, including macrophages, monocytes, and neutrophils, which detect pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs) and damage-associated molecular patterns (DAMPs) through specialized pattern recognition receptors (PRRs). Activation of these receptors initiates a cascade of intracellular signaling pathways that regulate inflammatory responses essential for host defense, tissue repair, and immune homeostasis.

A diverse set of PRR families contributes to innate immune surveillance, including Toll-like receptors (TLRs), C-type lectin receptors, RIG-I-like receptors, and NOD-like receptors (NLRs). Among these, NLRs play a particularly important role in sensing intracellular stress signals and coordinating inflammasome assembly, placing them at the center of sterile inflammatory responses relevant to chronic neurodegenerative diseases.

2.2 Inflammasome Architecture and Effector Functions

Inflammasomes are cytosolic multiprotein complexes belonging to the NOD-like receptor family

that function as central regulators of inflammatory signaling and programmed inflammatory cell death. A canonical inflammasome complex typically consists of three core components: a sensor protein (such as NLRP3), the adaptor protein ASC (apoptosis-associated speck-like protein containing a CARD), and the effector enzyme caspase-1.

Upon sensing activating stimuli, these components assemble into a functional signaling platform that drives autocatalytic activation of caspase-1. Activated caspase-1 subsequently mediates the proteolytic cleavage of pro–interleukin-1β (pro–IL-1β) and pro–interleukin-18 (pro–IL-18) into their biologically active forms, IL-1β and IL-18. These cytokines are central mediators of neuroinflammatory signaling and are increasingly recognized as potential biomarkers of inflammatory activity and disease progression in Alzheimer's disease.

In addition to cytokine maturation, caspase-1 cleaves gasdermin D (GSDMD), leading to pore formation in the plasma membrane and induction of pyroptosis, a highly inflammatory form of programmed cell death. This process further amplifies local inflammatory signaling and contributes to tissue injury in chronic disease states.

2.3 Inflammasome Diversity and the Predominance of NLRP3

Multiple inflammasome platforms have been identified, including AIM2, pyrin, NLRP1, NLRP3, and NLRC4 inflammasomes. Each is activated by distinct stimuli and serves specialized roles in immune defense. Among these, the NLRP3 inflammasome is the most extensively studied due to its broad responsiveness to diverse sterile and infectious triggers and its strong association with chronic inflammatory disorders, including neurodegenerative diseases.

In contrast to other inflammasomes that respond to specific ligands, NLRP3 is uniquely activated by a wide range of cellular stress signals, making it a central integrator of pathological conditions such as those observed in Alzheimer's disease.

2.4 Canonical Two-Signal Model of NLRP3 Activation

Activation of the NLRP3 inflammasome follows a tightly regulated two-signal model consisting of priming and activation phases. The priming step is initiated through Toll-like receptor (TLR) signaling or cytokine receptor engagement, resulting in activation of the NF-κB pathway. This transcriptional program leads to upregulation of NLRP3 itself, as well as the inactive precursors of IL-1β and IL-18, thereby preparing the cell for inflammasome assembly.

The second signal involves exposure to a wide range of cellular stressors, including extracellular ATP, ionic flux disturbances, mitochondrial dysfunction, and lysosomal damage. These stimuli converge on key intracellular events such as potassium efflux, calcium influx, reactive oxygen species (ROS) generation, and cathepsin release. Among these, potassium efflux is widely regarded as a central upstream event, as its inhibition consistently suppresses NLRP3 activation across multiple experimental conditions, highlighting its fundamental role in inflammasome regulation.

2.5 Mitochondrial Dysfunction and Reactive Oxygen Species in NLRP3 Regulation

Mitochondrial dysfunction and ROS generation have been strongly implicated in the activation of the NLRP3 inflammasome; however, their precise mechanistic roles remain incompletely defined and, in some contexts, controversial. While several studies suggest that ROS primarily contribute to the priming phase through NF-κB activation, others propose a more direct role in inflammasome assembly and activation.

This inconsistency reflects the complex and context-dependent nature of inflammasome regulation and highlights ongoing gaps in understanding the precise molecular events governing NLRP3 activation under pathological conditions, particularly in neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease.

2.6 NLRP3 Inflammasome Activation in Alzheimer's Disease

In Alzheimer's disease, aberrant activation of the NLRP3 inflammasome is predominantly observed in microglia and astrocytes, where it contributes to sustained neuroinflammatory signaling within the central nervous system. Amyloid-β (Aβ) aggregates, particularly in their oligomeric and fibrillar forms, function as potent damage-associated molecular patterns that initiate and sustain inflammasome activation.

This persistent activation leads to caspase-1–dependent maturation and release of IL-1β and IL-18, which perpetuate a chronic pro-inflammatory environment in the brain. These cytokines further contribute to synaptic dysfunction, neuronal injury, and progressive cognitive decline. Importantly, both IL-1β and IL-18 are increasingly being investigated in cerebrospinal fluid and peripheral blood as potential biomarkers for disease progression, severity, and therapeutic response in Alzheimer's disease.

2.7 Microglial Polarization and Functional Consequences of NLRP3 Activation

Amyloid-β–induced activation of microglia promotes a phenotypic shift toward a pro-inflammatory M1 state, characterized by elevated NLRP3 signaling, increased IL-1β production, and enhanced neurotoxic activity. This sustained inflammatory phenotype contributes directly to synaptic loss, neuronal dysfunction, and cognitive decline.

In contrast, genetic or pharmacological inhibition of NLRP3 or caspase-1 promotes a shift toward an anti-inflammatory M2 phenotype, which is associated with reduced cytokine production, enhanced resolution of inflammation, and improved cognitive outcomes in experimental Alzheimer's disease models, including APP/PS1 transgenic mice. These findings highlight the functional plasticity of microglia and underscore the therapeutic relevance of inflammasome modulation.

2.8 Conceptual Summary

Overall, the NLRP3 inflammasome functions as a central sensor and amplification system for pathological stress signals in Alzheimer's disease. It integrates amyloid-β–induced cellular damage, cytokine dysregulation, and innate immune activation into a unified inflammatory cascade. Through this mechanism, NLRP3 serves as a critical molecular hub linking protein aggregation to chronic neuroinflammation, progressive neurodegeneration, and biomarker-relevant inflammatory signaling, making it a key target for both mechanistic understanding and therapeutic intervention in Alzheimer's disease.

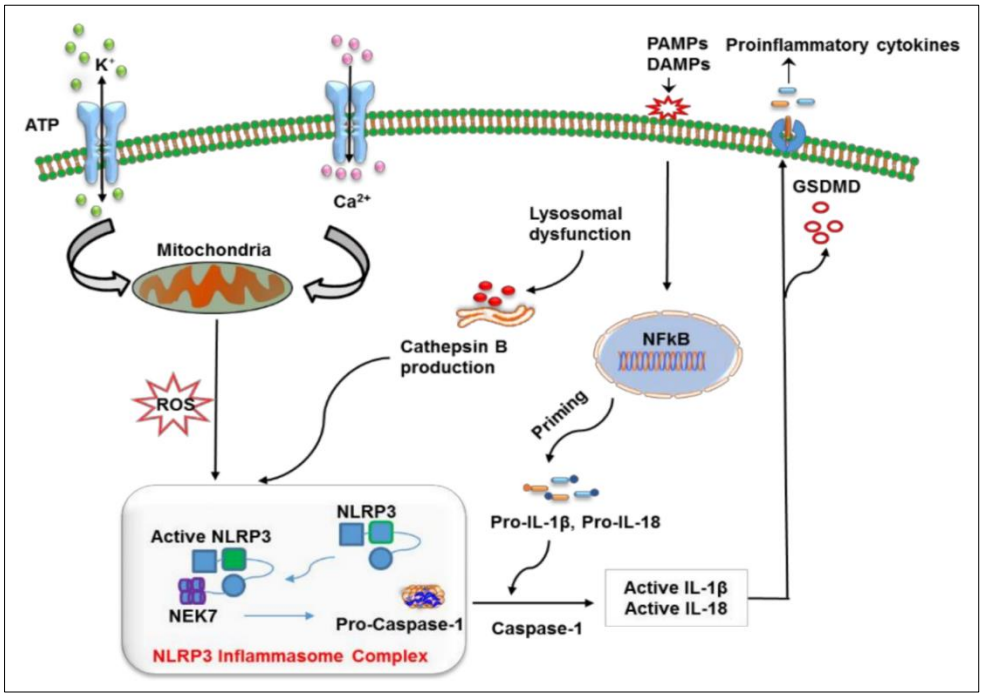

Figure 1: Molecular mechanisms of NLRP3 inflammasome activation in Alzheimer's disease

Activation of the NLRP3 inflammasome occurs through a two-signal process. Signal 1 (priming) is mediated by NF-κB activation, which induces the expression of NLRP3 and the precursor cytokines pro–IL-1β and pro–IL-18. Signal 2 is triggered by cellular stressors, including potassium (K^+) efflux, calcium (Ca^{2+}) influx, mitochondrial dysfunction with reactive oxygen species (ROS) production, lysosomal rupture with cathepsin B release, and ATP signaling. These events promote assembly of the NLRP3 inflammasome complex, activation of caspase-1, maturation of IL-1β and IL-18, and gasdermin D (GSDMD)-mediated pyroptosis. Persistent activation of this pathway contributes to chronic neuroinflammation and Alzheimer's disease progression.

The key pathological triggers and molecular mechanisms involved in NLRP3 inflammasome activation in Alzheimer's disease are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Major pathological triggers and mechanisms of NLRP3 inflammasome activation in Alzheimer's disease (2019–2025)

Trigger	Molecular mechanism	Relevance to Alzheimer's disease
Amyloid-β (Aβ) aggregates	Phagocytosis induces lysosomal rupture and cathepsin B release	Major initiator of microglial NLRP3 activation
Hyperphosphorylated tau	Impairs autophagy and promotes mitochondrial dysfunction	Amplifies inflammasome activation and neurodegeneration
Extracellular ATP	Activates P2X7 receptors, causing potassium (K^+) efflux	Strong secondary activation signal for NLRP3

Trigger	Molecular mechanism	Relevance to Alzheimer's disease
Potassium (K^+) efflux	Common downstream event triggered by multiple stimuli	Essential activation signal for inflammasome assembly
Calcium (Ca^{2+}) influx	Alters mitochondrial homeostasis and promotes ROS generation	Facilitates NLRP3 activation
Reactive oxygen species (ROS)	Produced during mitochondrial dysfunction and oxidative stress	Enhances inflammasome activation and neuronal injury
Mitochondrial dysfunction	Releases mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA), ROS, and cardiolipin	Acts as a major danger-associated molecular pattern (DAMP)
Mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA)	Cytosolic mtDNA directly activates innate immune pathways	Promotes sustained neuroinflammation
Lysosomal damage	Releases cathepsin B into the cytoplasm	Triggers NLRP3 activation following Aβ uptake
Cholesterol crystals	Cause lysosomal membrane destabilization	Promote sterile inflammation in AD
Endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress	Activates unfolded protein response and inflammatory signaling	Contributes to chronic inflammasome activation
PAMPs/DAMPs	Activate pattern recognition receptors (PRRs) and NF-κB	Provide the priming signal for inflammasome activation

3. Pro-Inflammatory Cytokines and Their Role in Alzheimer's Disease Pathology

3.1 Cytokine-Mediated Neuroimmune Signaling in Alzheimer's Disease

Pro-inflammatory cytokines serve as fundamental mediators of neuroimmune communication and play a central role in the progression of Alzheimer's disease (AD). Under physiological conditions, cytokines regulate immune surveillance, tissue repair, and homeostatic signaling within the central nervous system. However, in AD, dysregulated cytokine production contributes to chronic neuroinflammation, which is increasingly recognized as a key driver of synaptic dysfunction, neuronal injury, and progressive cognitive decline.

In response to amyloid-β (Aβ) accumulation and amyloid precursor protein (APP)-associated cellular stress, resident immune cells of the brain, particularly microglia and astrocytes, become persistently activated. This sustained glial activation leads to continuous production of cytokines and chemokines, establishing a chronic inflammatory microenvironment that amplifies neurodegenerative processes rather than resolving them.

3.2 Major Pro- and Anti-Inflammatory Cytokines in AD Pathology

A wide spectrum of cytokines is implicated in Alzheimer's disease pathology, with consistently elevated levels of interleukin-1β (IL-1β), interleukin-6 (IL-6), tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), and interleukin-18 (IL-18) reported in both experimental models and clinical samples.

Among these, IL-1β and IL-18 are of particular importance due to their direct regulation by inflammasome activation, especially the NLRP3 inflammasome. Their elevated levels in cerebrospinal fluid and peripheral blood are increasingly investigated as potential biomarkers of neuroinflammatory burden, disease severity, and progression in AD.

IL-6 and TNF-α further contribute to neurodegenerative processes by promoting synaptic dysfunction, enhancing neuronal susceptibility to injury, and disrupting blood–brain barrier integrity. In contrast, interleukin-10 (IL-10) functions as a key anti-inflammatory cytokine that counterbalances excessive immune activation and maintains immune homeostasis within the central nervous system, although this regulatory mechanism is often insufficient in the AD brain.

3.3 The Unresolved Role of Neuroinflammation in Disease Progression

Despite strong evidence linking cytokine dysregulation to Alzheimer's disease pathology, a fundamental question remains unresolved: whether neuroinflammation acts primarily as a driver of disease progression or as a secondary response to ongoing neurodegeneration.

On one hand, cytokine elevation may accelerate pathological processes by amplifying synaptic damage and neuronal loss. On the other hand, it may represent a compensatory immune response to accumulated protein aggregates and neuronal injury. This ambiguity has significant implications for both biomarker interpretation and therapeutic strategy development, particularly in distinguishing pathogenic inflammation from protective immune responses.

3.4 Pathophysiological Consequences of Cytokine Dysregulation

Persistent elevation of pro-inflammatory cytokines in Alzheimer's disease reflects sustained activation of neuroimmune pathways and is closely associated with progressive disruption of neuronal and

synaptic integrity. Chronic cytokine exposure impairs synaptic transmission, increases neuronal vulnerability to excitotoxic and oxidative stress, and accelerates neurodegenerative cascades.

Over time, this dysregulated immune signaling leads to a pathological shift from acute, protective inflammatory responses toward chronic, maladaptive inflammation. In this state, sustained cytokine production becomes a primary driver of tissue dysfunction rather than a transient protective mechanism. This transition is largely mediated by activated microglia and astrocytes, which maintain a persistently inflamed neural microenvironment that contributes to progressive neural network deterioration and cognitive decline in Alzheimer's disease.

3.5 Conceptual Integration of Cytokine Dysregulation in AD

Collectively, cytokine dysregulation represents a central pathological feature of Alzheimer's disease that bridges innate immune activation and neurodegeneration. Rather than functioning as isolated signaling molecules, cytokines operate within an interconnected network of glial activation, inflammasome signaling, and neuronal stress responses. This integrated inflammatory system provides a mechanistic framework linking amyloid pathology, tau dysfunction, and chronic neuroinflammation, thereby contributing to progressive disease evolution.

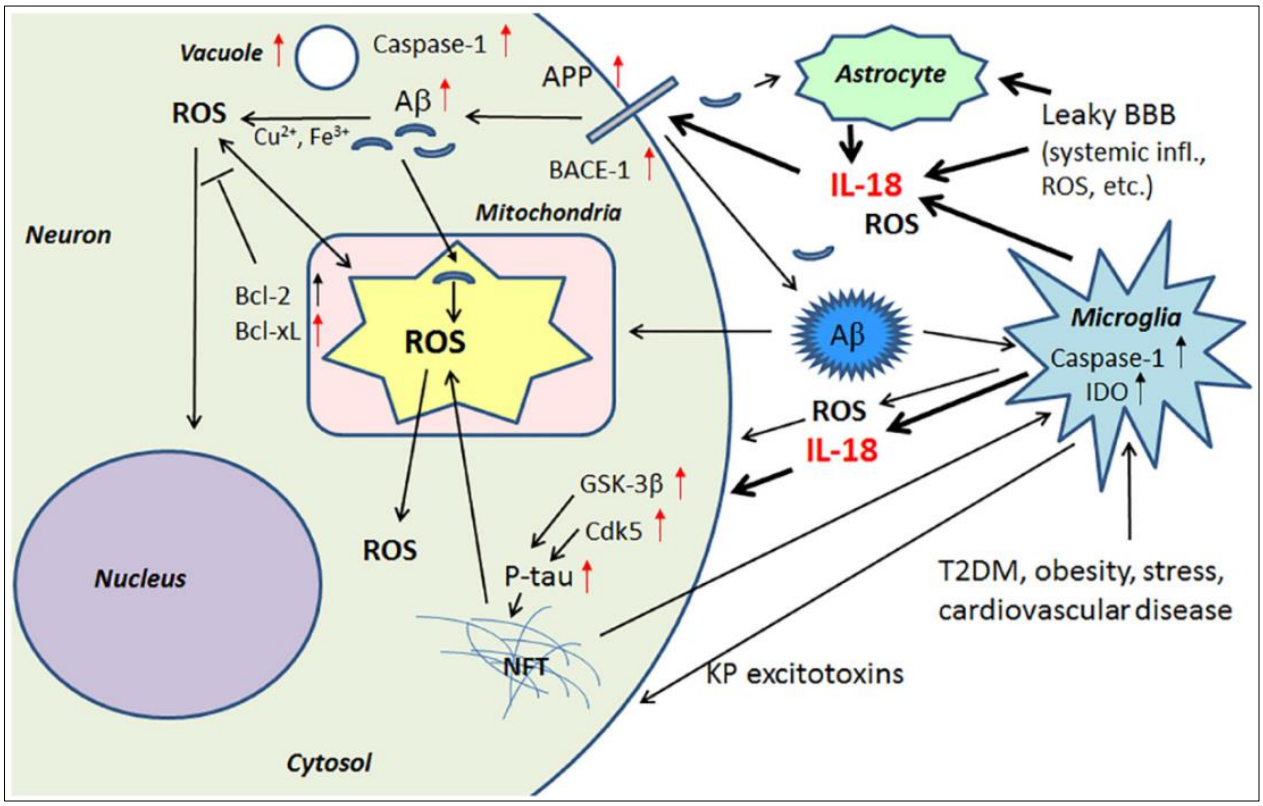

Figure 2: Neuroimmune and oxidative stress mechanisms contributing to Alzheimer's disease progression

Amyloid precursor protein (APP) dysregulation and amyloid-β (Aβ) accumulation promote mitochondrial dysfunction and excessive reactive oxygen species (ROS) generation, leading to neuronal injury and tau hyperphosphorylation. Aβ also activates microglia and astrocytes, stimulating inflammatory signaling and increased production of cytokines, particularly IL-18, together with oxidative stress that further amplifies neuronal damage. Blood–brain barrier (BBB) dysfunction and systemic metabolic disturbances exacerbate these neuroimmune responses, establishing a self-perpetuating cycle of oxidative stress, neuroinflammation, and neurodegeneration in Alzheimer's disease.

The key pro-inflammatory cytokines involved in Alzheimer's disease, along with their cellular sources, functional roles, and biomarker potential, are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Key pro-inflammatory and anti-inflammatory cytokines involved in Alzheimer's disease and their functional roles (2019–2025)

Cytokine	Primary Cellular Source(s)	Functional Role in Alzheimer's Disease	Biomarker Potential
IL-1β	Microglia; inflammasome-activated immune cells	Promotes synaptic dysfunction, tau hyperphosphorylation, neuronal injury, and amplification of neuroinflammatory responses	CSF and blood biomarker candidate for neuroinflammation and disease progression
IL-18	Microglia, astrocytes, and inflammasome-activated immune cells	Amplifies neuroinflammation, oxidative stress, neuronal injury, and microglial activation	CSF and blood biomarker candidate reflecting inflammasome activation and disease severity
IL-6	Microglia, astrocytes, neurons	Mediates acute-phase inflammatory responses; exhibits context-dependent neuroprotective and neurodegenerative effects	Peripheral blood and CSF inflammatory biomarker under investigation
TNF-α	Microglia, astrocytes	Contributes to synaptic dysfunction, neuronal apoptosis, blood–brain barrier disruption, and sustained neuroinflammation	Serum and CSF inflammatory biomarker associated with disease severity
IL-10	Microglia, astrocytes, T lymphocytes, and regulatory immune cells	Anti-inflammatory cytokine that suppresses excessive immune activation and promotes immune homeostasis; inadequate IL-10 signaling may permit persistent neuroinflammation	Indicator of anti-inflammatory immune regulation (investigational biomarker)

4. Crosstalk Between NLRP3 Inflammasome and Cytokine Signaling in Alzheimer's Disease

4.1 Neuroinflammatory Landscape in Alzheimer's Disease

Neuroinflammation in Alzheimer's disease arises from a highly interconnected network of signaling events involving activated microglia, astrocytes, and neuron–glia interactions. Within this inflammatory microenvironment, glial cells continuously produce a range of cytokines, including interleukin-1β (IL-1β), interleukin-6 (IL-6), tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), and interleukin-10 (IL-10). Collectively, these mediators regulate immune activation, synaptic function, and neuronal survival; however, in the diseased brain, their persistent dysregulation contributes to sustained neuroinflammation and progressive neurodegenerative injury.

4.2 PRR Signaling and NF-κB–Dependent Priming of Inflammasome Pathways

The initiation of neuroinflammatory signaling in Alzheimer's disease is primarily driven by pattern recognition receptor (PRR) activation. These include Toll-like receptors (TLRs), NOD-like receptors (NLRs), RIG-I-like receptors (RLRs), and C-type lectin receptors (CLRs), which collectively detect pathogen-associated and damage-associated molecular patterns.

Upon activation, these receptors converge on the NF-κB signaling pathway, which plays a central role in transcriptional regulation of inflammatory genes. NF-κB–mediated signaling induces the expression of NLRP3 and the inactive precursors of IL-1β, thereby establishing a primed cellular state that is essential for subsequent inflammasome activation. This priming step represents a critical regulatory checkpoint that determines the magnitude of downstream inflammatory responses.

4.3 NLRP3 Inflammasome Activation and Cytokine Maturation

Following priming, the NLRP3 inflammasome integrates diverse cellular stress signals, particularly those induced by amyloid-β accumulation and related neurotoxic insults. Upon activation, it assembles into a functional multiprotein complex that facilitates caspase-1 activation.

Activated caspase-1 mediates the proteolytic cleavage of pro–IL-1β and pro–IL-18 into their mature, biologically active forms, IL-1β and IL-18. These cytokines serve as key amplifiers of neuroinflammatory signaling and are strongly implicated in sustained glial activation, synaptic dysfunction, and neuronal injury in Alzheimer's disease. Their persistent elevation reflects ongoing inflammasome activity and is increasingly recognized as a potential indicator of disease progression and inflammatory burden.

4.4 Bidirectional Amplification between Inflammasome and Cytokine Signaling

A critical feature of Alzheimer's disease–associated neuroinflammation is the existence of a bidirectional amplification loop between inflammasome activation and cytokine signaling pathways. On one hand, NLRP3 inflammasome activation promotes the release of IL-1β and IL-18, thereby intensifying inflammatory signaling within the central nervous system.

On the other hand, cytokine-mediated activation of NF-κB further enhances transcriptional

priming of inflammasome components, reinforcing NLRP3 expression and sustaining its activation potential. This reciprocal interaction establishes a feed-forward inflammatory amplification circuit that perpetuates chronic neuroinflammation, promotes glial dysfunction, and accelerates neurodegenerative processes in Alzheimer's disease.

4.5 Integrated Model of Neuroinflammatory Regulation in Alzheimer's Disease

Collectively, the NLRP3 inflammasome and cytokine signaling pathways form an integrated neuroinflammatory regulatory network that governs immune responses in Alzheimer's disease. Upstream PRR–NF-κB signaling provides the priming mechanism, while downstream inflammasome activation mediates caspase-1–dependent maturation of IL-1β and IL-18, driving sustained inflammatory responses.

Under physiological conditions, this system contributes to controlled immune surveillance and tissue homeostasis. However, in Alzheimer's disease, chronic activation of this axis results in persistent neuroimmune imbalance. This sustained dysregulation ultimately contributes to synaptic degeneration, neuronal loss, and progressive cognitive decline, positioning the NLRP3–cytokine axis as a central mechanistic driver of disease pathology.

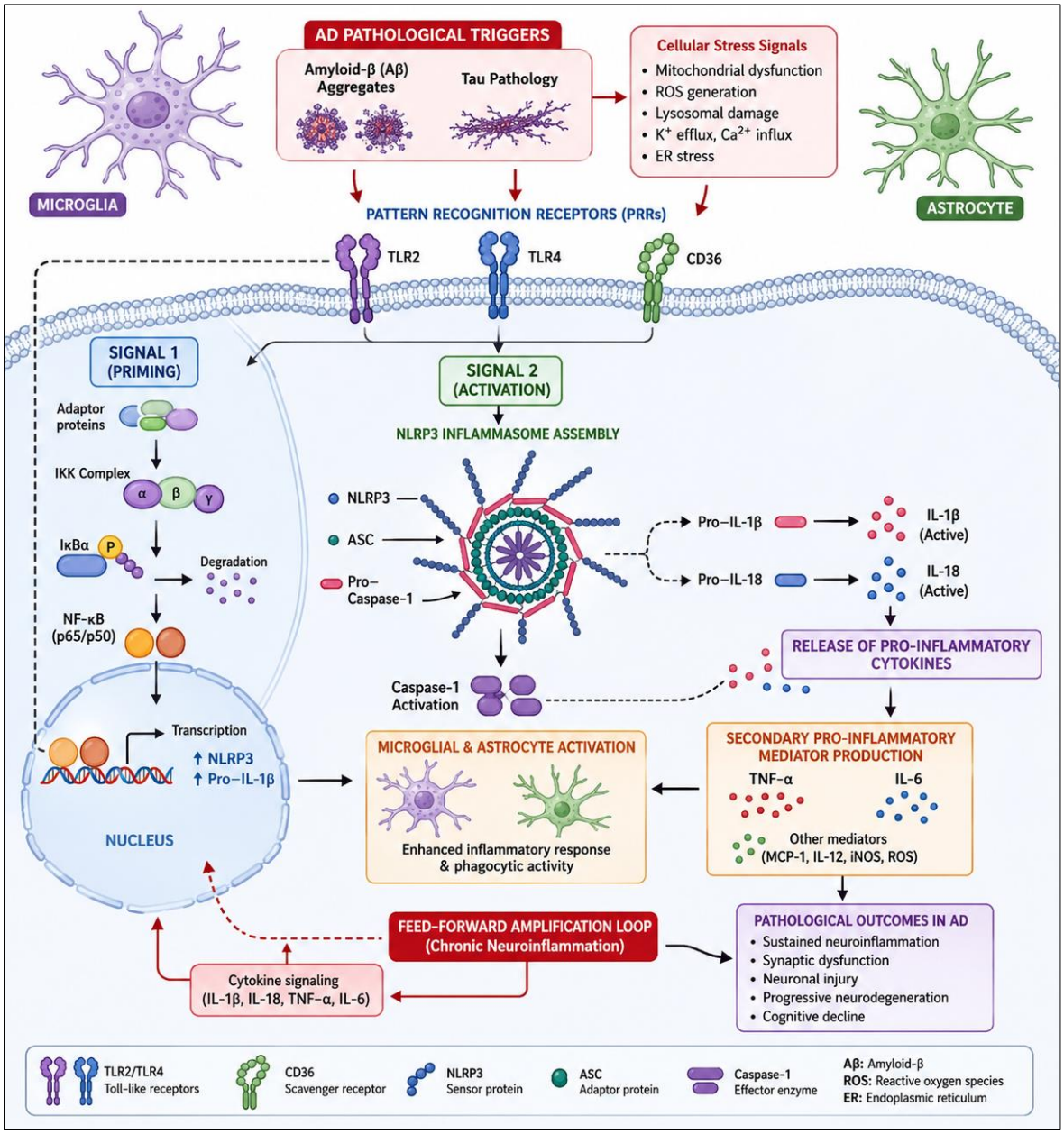

Figure 3: Inflammatory feedback circuitry linking NLRP3 inflammasome activation and cytokine signaling in Alzheimer's disease

Amyloid-β (Aβ) aggregates, tau pathology, and cellular stress activate pattern recognition receptors (PRRs), including Toll-like receptors (TLRs) and CD36, resulting in NF-κB-mediated priming of the NLRP3 inflammasome. Subsequent inflammasome assembly activates caspase-1, leading to maturation and release of interleukin-1β (IL-1β) and interleukin-18 (IL-18). These cytokines promote activation of microglia and astrocytes and stimulate production of secondary inflammatory mediators, including tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) and interleukin-6 (IL-6). Cytokine-mediated NF-κB activation further enhances NLRP3 expression, establishing a self-amplifying inflammatory feedback loop that contributes to chronic neuroinflammation, synaptic dysfunction, neuronal injury, and progressive neurodegeneration in Alzheimer's disease.

5. Therapeutic Modulation of the NLRP3 Inflammasome–Cytokine Axis in Alzheimer's Disease

5.1 Rationale for Targeting Neuroinflammatory Pathways in Alzheimer's Disease

Targeting the NLRP3 inflammasome–cytokine signaling axis has emerged as a promising therapeutic strategy for modulating chronic neuroinflammation in Alzheimer's disease (AD). The rationale for this approach is strongly supported by preclinical evidence demonstrating that pharmacological inhibition of inflammasome signaling can significantly reduce the production of key pro-inflammatory mediators, including interleukin-1β (IL-1β), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), in experimental models of AD.

Among these mediators, IL-1β and IL-18 are of particular interest because they are direct downstream products of NLRP3 inflammasome activation and are increasingly being evaluated as candidate biomarkers for monitoring neuroinflammatory burden, disease progression, and therapeutic response. This dual functional relevance highlights their importance not only as pathogenic effectors but also as measurable indicators of inflammasome activity in clinical settings.

5.2 Challenges in Cytokine Targeting and Immune System Homeostasis

Despite encouraging preclinical outcomes, therapeutic modulation of cytokine signaling presents significant challenges due to the complex and context-dependent roles of inflammatory mediators in the central nervous system. In particular, IL-6 exhibits both pro-inflammatory and neuroprotective functions depending on disease stage and microenvironmental context.

This functional duality introduces a major translational limitation, as broad suppression of cytokine signaling may inadvertently disrupt physiological immune regulation, tissue repair mechanisms, and homeostatic immune surveillance within the brain. Consequently, achieving selective modulation of pathological inflammation without impairing protective immune functions remains a critical challenge in therapeutic development.

5.3 Conventional and Emerging Neurotherapeutic Approaches

Current standard-of-care treatments for Alzheimer's disease, such as memantine, primarily target glutamatergic excitotoxicity and provide symptomatic relief without directly addressing underlying neuroinflammatory mechanisms or inflammasome activation.

In contrast, emerging therapeutic strategies, including nanoparticle-based drug delivery systems and stem cell–based interventions, have demonstrated anti-inflammatory, neuroprotective, and neurorestorative effects in experimental models. These approaches hold considerable promise for targeting multiple pathological pathways simultaneously; however, their clinical translation remains limited by challenges related to safety, reproducibility, scalability, and efficient blood–brain barrier penetration.

5.4 Biologic Therapies Targeting Cytokine Signaling Pathways

Biologic agents targeting cytokine signaling represent a more direct immunomodulatory strategy in Alzheimer's disease. Agents such as canakinumab (IL-1β–neutralizing monoclonal antibody), anakinra (IL-1 receptor antagonist), and interleukin-18 binding protein (IL-18BP) have demonstrated efficacy in systemic inflammatory diseases, validating the therapeutic relevance of cytokine inhibition.

However, their application in Alzheimer's disease remains largely experimental. Major limitations include insufficient central nervous system penetration, suboptimal pharmacokinetic profiles, and concerns regarding long-term systemic immunosuppression. These barriers underscore the need for brain-targeted delivery systems and disease-specific therapeutic optimization.

5.5 Natural Compounds and Modulation of NF-κB/NLRP3 Signaling

A growing body of evidence suggests that natural compounds such as curcumin, resveratrol, and baicalin can inhibit NF-κB activation and suppress NLRP3 inflammasome signaling, resulting in reduced production of pro-inflammatory cytokines. These compounds therefore represent potential multi-target therapeutic agents for neuroinflammatory modulation in Alzheimer's disease.

However, their clinical applicability is limited by poor bioavailability, rapid metabolic degradation, and inadequate blood–brain barrier penetration. To overcome these limitations, advanced drug delivery platforms such as lipid nanoparticles, nanoemulsions,

and polymer-based carriers are being actively explored to enhance stability, bioavailability, and central nervous system targeting efficiency.

5.6 Direct Pharmacological Inhibition of the NLRP3 Inflammasome

Small-molecule inhibitors targeting the NLRP3 inflammasome represent a more direct and mechanistically specific therapeutic approach. Among these, MCC950 and OLT1177 (dapansutrile) have gained significant attention due to their ability to directly inhibit inflammasome activation and downstream cytokine production.

MCC950 has demonstrated strong anti-inflammatory and neuroprotective effects in preclinical models; however, its clinical development has been restricted due to safety concerns, including hepatotoxicity observed in early studies. In contrast, OLT1177 has shown a more favorable safety profile in early-phase clinical investigations, although its efficacy in Alzheimer's disease remains under active evaluation.

Collectively, these findings highlight a significant translational gap between preclinical success and clinical applicability, emphasizing the urgent need for biomarker-guided clinical trial design, improved safety profiling, and patient stratification based on inflammatory phenotypes.

5.7 Therapeutic Outlook and Summary

Overall, targeting the NLRP3 inflammasome–cytokine axis represents a highly promising therapeutic strategy for Alzheimer's disease by addressing a central driver of chronic neuroinflammation. However, successful clinical translation will require overcoming major challenges related to drug delivery, immune safety, target specificity, and patient selection.

Future therapeutic development will likely depend on integrated approaches combining inflammasome inhibition, biomarker-guided stratification, and advanced CNS-targeted delivery systems to achieve safe and effective modulation of neuroinflammatory pathways in Alzheimer's disease.

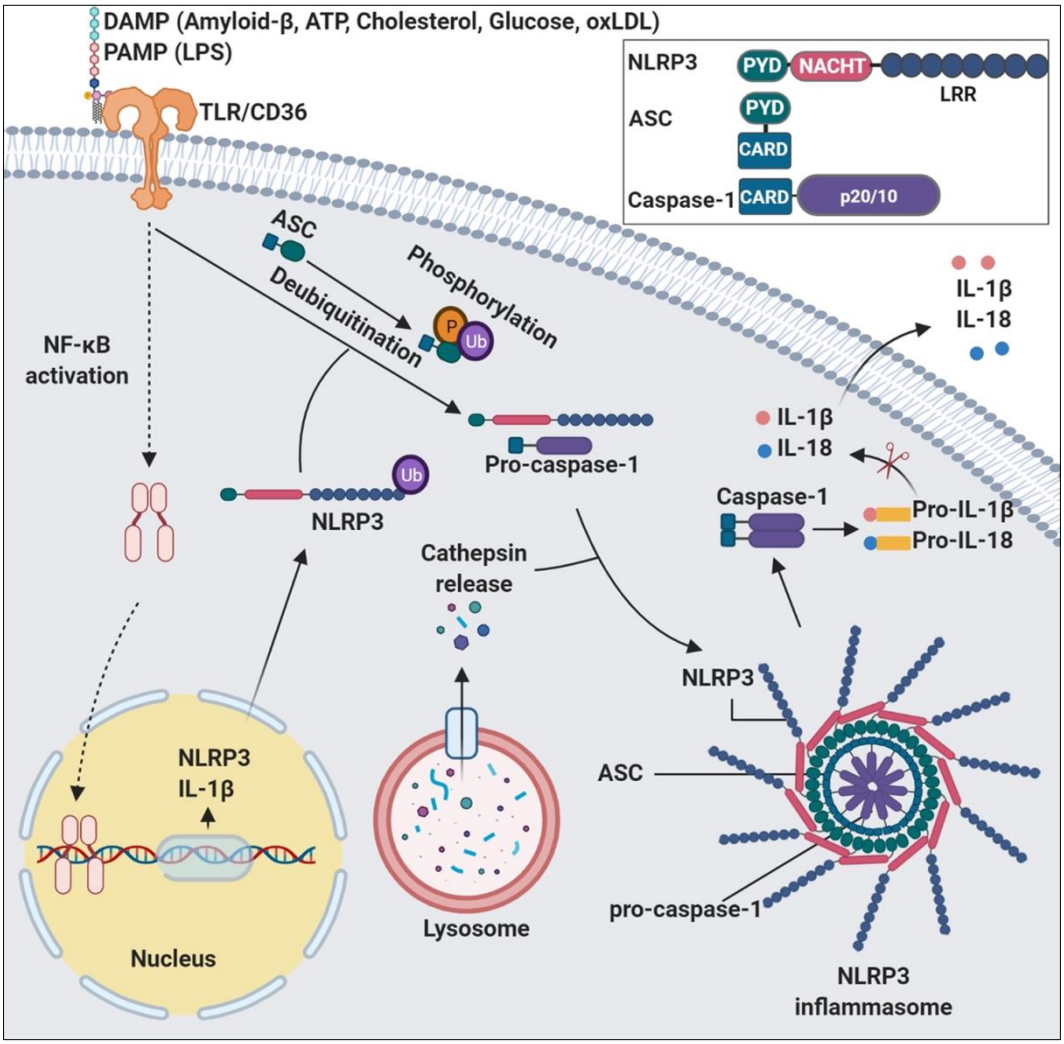

Figure 4: NLRP3 inflammasome activation and cytokine maturation cascade

Damage-associated molecular patterns (DAMPs) and pathogen-associated molecular patterns (PAMPs) activate TLR/CD36-mediated NF-κB signaling, resulting in transcriptional priming of NLRP3 and pro-IL-1β. Subsequent activation signals, including lysosomal damage and cathepsin release, promote assembly of the NLRP3–ASC–caspase-1 inflammasome complex. Activated caspase-1 cleaves pro-IL-1β and pro-IL-18 into mature IL-1β and IL-18, which amplify neuroinflammatory signaling and contribute to chronic glial activation and neurodegeneration in Alzheimer's disease.

Table 3 summarizes current therapeutic strategies targeting the NLRP3 inflammasome and associated cytokine signaling pathways in Alzheimer's disease, including small-molecule inhibitors, biologic agents, and natural compounds, together with their molecular targets, mechanisms of action, development status, and major limitations.

Table 3: Emerging therapeutic strategies targeting the NLRP3–cytokine axis in Alzheimer's disease (2019–2025)

Therapeutic agent	Primary target	Mechanism of action	Development status	Major limitation
MCC950	NLRP3	Selective inhibition of NLRP3 ATPase activity, preventing inflammasome assembly	Preclinical	Hepatotoxicity limited clinical development
OLT1177 (Dapansutrile)	NLRP3	Direct inhibition of NLRP3 activation	Early clinical trials	Efficacy in AD not yet established
JC124	NLRP3	Small-molecule inflammasome inhibitor	Preclinical	Limited human data
CY-09	NLRP3 ATPase	Blocks ATP binding to the NACHT domain	Preclinical	No clinical evaluation
Tranilast	NLRP3	Prevents NLRP3 oligomerization	Preclinical/Repurposing	Limited CNS evidence
Inzomelid	NLRP3	Oral selective NLRP3 inhibitor	Early clinical trials	AD-specific studies lacking
Somalix*	NLRP3	Experimental inflammasome inhibitor	Preclinical	Limited published evidence
VX-765	Caspase-1	Caspase-1 inhibitor that reduces IL-1β and IL-18 maturation	Early clinical evaluation	Limited BBB penetration
Anakinra	IL-1 receptor	Blocks IL-1 receptor signaling	Repurposed biologic	Poor CNS penetration
Canakinumab	IL-1β	Neutralizes IL-1β	Approved for systemic inflammatory diseases	High cost; limited CNS evidence
Curcumin	NF-κB/NLRP3	Suppresses NF-κB activation and NLRP3 signaling	Preclinical/Clinical supplements	Poor bioavailability
Resveratrol	NF-κB/SIRT1	Reduces oxidative stress and inflammatory signaling	Clinical investigations	Low brain bioavailability

6. Biomarkers of NLRP3 Inflammasome Activation and Cytokine Expression in Alzheimer's Disease

6.1 Classical Pathology and the Emergence of Neuroinflammatory Biomarkers

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is neuropathologically characterized by two hallmark lesions: senile plaques formed by extracellular accumulation of amyloid-β (Aβ) peptides and neurofibrillary tangles (NFTs) composed of hyperphosphorylated tau protein. These classical features have long defined the structural basis of AD; however, they do not fully account for disease progression, clinical heterogeneity, or temporal dynamics of neurodegeneration.

In recent years, neuroinflammation has emerged as a central and early contributor to AD pathogenesis, with increasing evidence implicating activated microglia and astrocytes as key drivers of disease progression. This shift has expanded the focus of biomarker research beyond protein aggregation toward immune signaling pathways, particularly inflammasome activation and cytokine dysregulation.

6.2 Transition from Acute Neuroprotection to Chronic Neuroinflammation

In the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, neuroinflammatory responses may serve adaptive and protective roles by facilitating debris clearance, supporting synaptic remodeling, and maintaining central nervous system (CNS) homeostasis. However, chronic exposure to amyloid-β aggregates and tau oligomers leads to persistent activation of glial cells, resulting in a sustained inflammatory state.

This transition from acute protective immunity to chronic maladaptive inflammation is a key pathological event in AD. Prolonged glial activation

contributes to enhanced amyloid deposition, accelerated tau propagation, synaptic dysfunction, and progressive neuronal loss, thereby reinforcing disease progression through a self-sustaining neurotoxic cycle.

6.3 NLRP3 Inflammasome as a Central Biomarker-Linked Inflammatory Axis

The NLRP3 inflammasome is a cytosolic multiprotein signaling complex composed of the NLRP3 sensor, ASC adaptor protein, and caspase-1 effector enzyme. Upon activation, caspase-1 mediates proteolytic cleavage of pro–interleukin-1β (pro–IL-1β) and pro–interleukin-18 (pro–IL-18), generating their active forms, IL-1β and IL-18, which are key mediators of neuroinflammatory signaling.

These cytokines amplify glial activation, promote neuronal injury, and sustain chronic inflammatory cascades in Alzheimer's disease. Importantly, IL-1β and IL-18 are increasingly recognized as candidate biomarkers of inflammasome activation, reflecting both disease severity and ongoing neuroimmune activity in the brain.

6.4 Self-Propagating Inflammatory Feedback in Alzheimer's Disease

A growing body of experimental evidence supports the existence of a self-amplifying inflammatory loop in Alzheimer's disease, in which NLRP3 inflammasome activation exacerbates amyloid-β and tau pathology, while Aβ and tau aggregates further stimulate inflammasome signaling. This bidirectional interaction creates a persistent feed-forward cycle that perpetuates neuroinflammation and accelerates neurodegeneration.

However, evidence from human post-mortem studies has been less consistent. Some analyses have reported no significant differences in total NLRP3 expression between Alzheimer's disease and control brains, suggesting that disease relevance may depend more on inflammasome activation status rather than expression levels alone. This highlights the importance of functional biomarkers rather than static protein quantification in understanding disease activity.

6.5 Fluid and Imaging Biomarkers of Inflammasome Activation

Multiple biomarker platforms have been proposed to assess NLRP3 inflammasome activity in Alzheimer's disease, including cerebrospinal fluid (CSF), peripheral blood, and neuroimaging-based approaches.

CSF and plasma levels of IL-1β and IL-18 have been shown to correlate with disease severity, cognitive decline, and microglial activation, supporting their utility as indirect biomarkers of neuroinflammatory burden. In addition, the detection of ASC specks in CSF provides a more direct measure of inflammasome assembly and activation, representing a mechanistic biomarker of ongoing inflammatory signaling.

Complementary to fluid biomarkers, translocator protein (TSPO) positron emission tomography (PET) imaging enables non-invasive visualization of microglial activation in vivo. Together, these approaches provide a multidimensional framework for assessing neuroinflammation and inflammasome activity in Alzheimer's disease.

6.6 Integrated Biomarker Perspective

Collectively, biomarkers of NLRP3 inflammasome activation and cytokine expression provide critical insights into the inflammatory component of Alzheimer's disease pathophysiology. Rather than relying on single molecular indicators, a combined biomarker approach integrating cytokine profiling, inflammasome-specific markers, and neuroimaging may offer a more accurate representation of disease activity, progression, and therapeutic response.

This integrated biomarker framework strengthens the translational potential of inflammasome research and supports the development of mechanism-based diagnostic and therapeutic strategies in Alzheimer's disease.

Table 4 summarizes the major inflammatory biomarkers associated with NLRP3 inflammasome activation in Alzheimer's disease, including their sample types, clinical relevance, and detection methods.

Table 4: Inflammatory biomarkers associated with NLRP3 inflammasome activation in Alzheimer's disease

Biomarker	Sample Type	Association with AD	Clinical Relevance	Detection Method
IL-1β	CSF, plasma	Elevated during neuroinflammation	Candidate biomarker for disease progression and therapeutic response	ELISA, multiplex immunoassay
IL-18	CSF, plasma, extracellular vesicles (EVs)	Reflects inflammasome activation	Candidate biomarker of microglial activation and neuroinflammation	ELISA, multiplex immunoassay
ASC specks	CSF	Direct indicator of NLRP3 inflammasome assembly	Potential biomarker of inflammasome activation	Immunoassay, flow cytometry

Biomarker	Sample Type	Association with AD	Clinical Relevance	Detection Method
TSPO	Brain (PET imaging)	Indicates activated microglia	Non-invasive imaging biomarker of neuroinflammation	TSPO-PET imaging

7. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

This review highlights the critical role of the NLRP3 inflammasome and downstream cytokine signaling in the pathogenesis of Alzheimer's disease, the most common cause of dementia worldwide. Accumulating evidence indicates that sustained activation of the NLRP3 inflammasome contributes to chronic neuroinflammation, driving persistent release of key pro-inflammatory cytokines, particularly interleukin-1β (IL-1β) and interleukin-18 (IL-18), which are increasingly recognized as potential biomarkers of neuroinflammatory burden, disease progression, and therapeutic response.

Preclinical studies have demonstrated that genetic or pharmacological inhibition of NLRP3 inflammasome components or caspase-1 can attenuate neuroinflammatory responses, reduce amyloid pathology, and improve cognitive performance in experimental models of Alzheimer's disease. Several small-molecule inhibitors, including MCC950, OLT1177, glyburide, and experimental compounds such as JC124 and Compound 44/45, have shown promising efficacy in preclinical settings. However, despite these encouraging findings, translation into clinical practice remains limited due to safety concerns, incomplete understanding of long-term immune modulation, and insufficient validation in human studies.

In parallel, natural compounds and repurposed drugs targeting NF-κB and upstream inflammasome-related pathways have demonstrated anti-inflammatory and neuroprotective effects. Nevertheless, their clinical application is restricted by unfavorable pharmacokinetic profiles, low bioavailability, and limited ability to cross the blood–brain barrier, which collectively reduce therapeutic efficacy in central nervous system disorders.

A major translational gap persists between experimental models and human Alzheimer's disease pathology. In particular, discrepancies between robust inflammasome activation observed in preclinical systems and inconsistent findings in post-mortem human brain studies suggest that disease-relevant assessment may depend more on functional activation states rather than static expression levels. This emphasizes the need for more refined biomarker strategies that capture dynamic inflammatory activity.

Future progress in this field will depend on the development of robust and standardized biomarkers, including cerebrospinal fluid cytokine profiles, ASC specks, and advanced neuroimaging modalities that can reliably quantify microglial activation and inflammasome activity in vivo. In addition, improved patient stratification approaches that incorporate inflammatory endotypes will be essential for the design of more precise and effective clinical trials.

Importantly, therapeutic strategies targeting the NLRP3 inflammasome must achieve a careful balance between suppressing pathological neuroinflammation and preserving essential innate immune functions, particularly in aging populations that are more vulnerable to infection and immune dysregulation.

Overall, the NLRP3 inflammasome represents a promising yet complex therapeutic target in Alzheimer's disease. Its successful clinical translation will require integrated biomarker-guided approaches, mechanistic stratification of patient populations, and carefully optimized immunomodulatory strategies to achieve both efficacy and safety.

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