

18/MHS07/044

PHS 212

assignment: discuss the somatosensory pathway

Answer:

A somatosensory pathway will typically consist of three neurons: primary, secondary, and tertiary.

- 1 In the periphery, the primary neuron is the sensory receptor that detects sensory stimuli like touch or temperature. The cell body of the primary neuron is housed in the dorsal root ganglion of a spinal nerve or, if sensation is in the head or neck, the ganglia of the trigeminal or cranial nerves.
- 2 The secondary neuron acts as a relay and is located in either the spinal cord or the brainstem. This neuron's ascending axons will cross, or decussate, to the opposite side of the spinal cord or brainstem and travel up the spinal cord to the brain, where most will terminate in either the thalamus or the cerebellum.
- 3 Tertiary neurons have cell bodies in the thalamus and project to the postcentral gyrus of the parietal lobe, forming a sensory homunculus in the case of touch. Regarding posture, the tertiary neuron is located in the cerebellum.

Processing

The primary somatosensory area of the human cortex is located in the postcentral gyrus of the parietal lobe. The postcentral gyrus is the location of the primary somatosensory area, the area of the cortex dedicated to the processing of touch information. At this location there is a map of sensory space referred to as a sensory homunculus.

A cortical homunculus is the brain's physical representation of the human body; it is a neurological map of the anatomical divisions of the body. The surface area of cortex dedicated to a body part correlates with the amount of somatosensory input from that area.

For example, there is a large area of cortex devoted to sensation in the hands, while the back requires a much smaller area. Somatosensory information involved with proprioception and posture is processed in the cerebellum.

Functions

The somatosensory system functions in the body's periphery, spinal cord, and the brain.

- Periphery: Sensory receptors (i.e., thermoreceptors, mechanoreceptors, etc.) detect the various stimuli.
- Spinal cord: Afferent pathways in the spinal cord serve to pass information from the periphery and the rest of the body to the brain.
- Brain: The postcentral gyrus contains Brodmann areas (BA) 3a, 3b, 1, and 2 that make up the somatosensory cortex. BA3a is involved with the sense of relative position of neighboring body parts and the amount of effort being used during movement. BA3b is responsible for distributing somatosensory information to BA1 and shape and size information to BA2.

Ascending Pathways

In the spinal cord, the somatosensory system includes ascending pathways from the body to the brain. One major target within the brain is the postcentral gyrus in the

cerebral cortex. This is the target for neurons of the dorsal column–medial lemniscal pathway and the ventral spinothalamic pathway.

Note that many ascending somatosensory pathways include synapses in either the thalamus or the reticular formation before they reach the cortex. Other ascending pathways, particularly those involved with control of posture, are projected to the cerebellum, including the ventral and dorsal spinocerebellar tracts.

Another important target for afferent somatosensory neurons that enter the spinal cord are those neurons involved with local segmental reflexes.

Parietal Lobe: Primary Somatosensory Area

The primary somatosensory area in the human cortex is located in the postcentral gyrus of the parietal lobe. This is the main sensory receptive area for the sense of touch.

Like other sensory areas, there is a map of sensory space called a homunculus at this location. Areas of this part of the human brain map to certain areas of the body, dependent on the amount or importance of somatosensory input from that area.

For example, there is a large area of cortex devoted to sensation in the hands, while the back has a much smaller area. Somatosensory information involved with proprioception and posture also target an entirely different part of the brain, the cerebellum.

Cortical Homunculus

This is a pictorial representation of the anatomical divisions of the primary motor cortex and the primary somatosensory cortex; namely, the portion of the human brain directly responsible for the movement and exchange of sensory and motor information of the body.