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ABSTRACT

The circadian system represents a fundamental biological organizing principle that coordinates metabolic, immune, and behavioral processes across the 24-hour day-night cycle. Emerging evidence demonstrates that circadian disruption, whether induced by shift work, transmeridian travel, or artificial light exposure, precipitates dysbiosis characterized by altered microbial community composition and reduced production of short-chain fatty acids and secondary bile acids. This dysbiosis-induced metabolite deficiency, combined with circadian misalignment of intestinal barrier function and immune responses, creates a permissive environment for metabolic endotoxemia, characterized by elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide and systemic inflammation. This comprehensive review synthesizes evidence from chronobiology, microbiology, and immunology examining the bidirectional interactions between circadian disruption and dysbiosis, the mechanisms through which circadian-dysbiosis coupling amplifies metabolic endotoxemia, and the clinical consequences for metabolic health, cardiovascular function, and psychiatric outcomes. We critically evaluate the adequacy of current mechanistic models, identify gaps in translational research, and propose a temporal framework for understanding dysbiosis-induced pathophysiology that integrates circadian biology with microbiota science.

The Temporal Organization of Microbiota-Host Interactions

The discovery that the gut microbiota exhibits robust circadian rhythmicity, with microbial community composition and metabolic activity varying substantially across the 24-hour day, has fundamentally altered our understanding of microbiota-host interactions. For decades, microbiota research focused primarily on the compositional and functional properties of microbial communities without explicit consideration of temporal dynamics. However, accumulating evidence demonstrates that the timing of microbial metabolite production, the circadian expression of microbial genes, and the temporal coordination between host circadian rhythms and microbial rhythmicity represent critical determinants of health and disease.

The circadian system, centered on the suprachiasmatic nucleus in the hypothalamus, functions as a master clock that synchronizes peripheral circadian oscillators present in virtually every organ and cell type. These peripheral oscillators are entrained by multiple signals including light exposure, feeding-fasting cycles, physical activity, and social interactions. The circadian system coordinates the temporal expression of thousands of genes involved in metabolism, immune function, and behavior, ensuring that physiological processes occur at optimal times relative to the external environment.

The gut microbiota exhibits circadian rhythmicity that is entrained by multiple host signals, particularly the feeding-fasting cycle. The composition of the microbiota varies substantially across the 24-hour day, with certain bacterial taxa exhibiting peak abundance during specific circadian phases. Additionally, the metabolic activity of the microbiota exhibits circadian rhythmicity, with production of short-chain fatty acids and secondary bile acids varying across the day.

This circadian rhythmicity of the microbiota is not merely a passive response to host circadian signals but represents an active temporal organization of microbial communities that has been shaped by evolutionary pressures to optimize microbiota-host interactions.

Circadian disruption, whether induced by shift work, transmeridian travel, or artificial light exposure, disrupts the entrainment of both the host circadian system and the microbiota circadian rhythmicity. This circadian misalignment creates a state of internal desynchrony in which the central circadian clock becomes misaligned with peripheral circadian oscillators, and the host circadian system becomes misaligned with the microbiota circadian rhythmicity. The consequences of this circadian misalignment are profound, including dysbiosis, metabolite deficiency, compromised intestinal barrier function, and metabolic endotoxemia.

This review synthesizes evidence regarding the bidirectional interactions between circadian disruption and dysbiosis, the mechanisms through which circadian-dysbiosis coupling amplifies metabolic endotoxemia, and the clinical consequences for metabolic health and psychiatric outcomes. We propose a temporal framework for understanding dysbiosis-induced pathophysiology that integrates circadian biology with microbiota science, and we identify critical gaps in current understanding that require future research.

Circadian Organization of the Microbiota: Mechanisms and Functional Significance

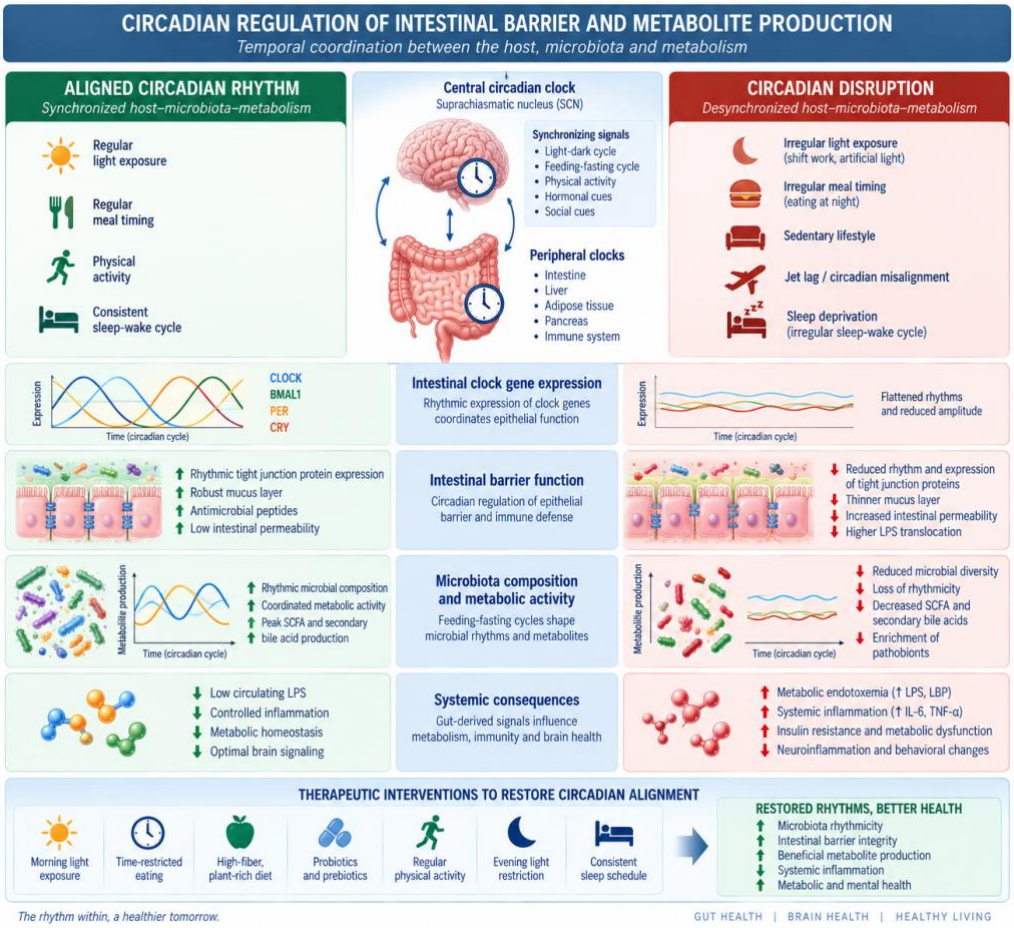
The gut microbiota exhibits robust circadian rhythmicity in both community composition and metabolic activity. Studies using 16S ribosomal RNA gene sequencing and whole-genome shotgun metagenomic sequencing have demonstrated that the relative abundance of specific bacterial taxa varies substantially across the 24-hour day. Certain bacterial taxa exhibit peak abundance during the active phase of the host, while others exhibit peak abundance during the rest phase. This temporal organization of microbial communities is not random but represents a coordinated temporal structure that has been shaped by evolutionary pressures to optimize microbiota-host interactions.

The mechanisms through which the host circadian system entrains the microbiota circadian rhythmicity involve multiple signaling pathways. The feeding-fasting cycle represents the primary entraining signal for the microbiota circadian clock. The timing and composition of nutrient intake directly influence microbial community composition and metabolic activity. Feeding triggers rapid changes in the intestinal environment, including alterations in pH, oxygen tension, and nutrient availability, which influence microbial growth rates and metabolic activity. The circadian timing of feeding is particularly important, with studies demonstrating that the same diet consumed at different circadian times produces different effects on microbiota composition and metabolic activity.

The host circadian system influences the microbiota through multiple additional mechanisms beyond nutrient availability. The circadian expression of antimicrobial peptides, including lysozyme and defensins, varies across the 24-hour day, influencing microbial growth and community composition. The circadian expression of mucus-producing goblet cells influences the thickness and composition of the mucus layer, which affects microbial access to the intestinal epithelium. The circadian expression of intestinal immune cells, including intraepithelial lymphocytes and lamina propria lymphocytes, influences the immune pressure exerted on the microbiota. Additionally, the circadian expression of tight junction proteins influences intestinal barrier permeability, which affects the translocation of microbial products and the interaction between the microbiota and the host immune system.

The microbiota, in turn, influences the host circadian system through production of metabolites and signaling molecules. Short-chain fatty acids produced by the microbiota activate G-protein-coupled receptors on intestinal epithelial cells and immune cells, generating signals that are transmitted to the central nervous system through vagal afferent fibers. Secondary bile acids produced by the microbiota activate farnesoid X receptor and TGR5 on intestinal epithelial cells and immune cells, generating signals that influence the host circadian system. These microbiota-derived signals influence the expression of circadian clock genes in peripheral tissues, thereby synchronizing peripheral circadian oscillators with the microbiota circadian rhythmicity.

The functional significance of microbiota circadian rhythmicity is evident from studies demonstrating that disruption of microbiota circadian rhythmicity, even in the absence of changes in microbiota composition, produces adverse metabolic and immune consequences. Studies using germ-free mice colonized with dysbiotic microbiota from circadian-disrupted humans demonstrate that the dysbiotic microbiota, when introduced into mice maintained on a normal light-dark cycle, produces metabolic dysfunction and increased susceptibility to infection. These findings suggest that the temporal organization of the microbiota, independent of its compositional properties, represents a critical determinant of health.



LEGEND: SCFA, short-chain fatty acids; LPS, lipopolysaccharide; ZO-1, zonula occludens-1; JAM-A, junctional adhesion molecule A; MUC2, mucin 2; Treg, regulatory T cell; CYP7A1, cytochrome P450 7A1; ↑ indicates increase; ↓ indicates decrease; ↑↑ indicates large increase; ↓↓ indicates large decrease.

Circadian Disruption and Dysbiosis: Mechanisms of Microbiota Desynchronization

Circadian disruption, whether induced by shift work, transmeridian travel, or artificial light exposure, disrupts the entrainment of the microbiota circadian clock, leading to dysbiosis characterized by altered microbial community composition and reduced production of short-chain fatty acids and secondary bile acids. The mechanisms through which circadian disruption produces dysbiosis involve multiple interconnected pathways.

The most direct mechanism involves disruption of the feeding-fasting cycle. Shift workers and individuals with circadian misalignment typically consume meals at irregular times that are misaligned with their circadian phase. This temporal misalignment between nutrient intake and the host circadian system disrupts the entrainment of the microbiota circadian clock. Studies demonstrate that the same diet consumed at different circadian times produces different effects on microbiota composition, with consumption of meals during the biological night producing greater dysbiosis compared to consumption of meals during the biological day.

A second mechanism involves circadian disruption of intestinal barrier function. The expression of tight junction proteins, including claudins, occludin, and zonula occludens proteins, exhibits circadian rhythmicity, with peak expression occurring during specific circadian phases. Circadian disruption flattens this rhythmicity, leading to compromised intestinal barrier function and increased intestinal permeability. The increased intestinal permeability allows enhanced translocation of bacterial lipopolysaccharide and other pathogen-associated molecular patterns, contributing to metabolic endotoxemia.

A third mechanism involves circadian disruption of intestinal barrier function. The expression of tight junction proteins, including claudins, occludin, and zonula occludens proteins, exhibits circadian rhythmicity, with peak expression occurring during specific circadian phases. Circadian disruption flattens this rhythmicity, leading to compromised intestinal barrier function and increased intestinal permeability. The increased intestinal permeability allows enhanced translocation of bacterial lipopolysaccharide and other pathogen-associated molecular patterns, contributing to metabolic endotoxemia.

A third mechanism involves circadian disruption of antimicrobial peptide production. The intestinal epithelium produces multiple antimicrobial peptides, including lysozyme, defensins, and lactoferrin, which exhibit circadian rhythmicity in their expression. These antimicrobial peptides play critical roles in shaping microbial community composition by selectively inhibiting the growth of certain bacterial taxa while allowing others to proliferate. Circadian disruption flattens the circadian rhythmicity of antimicrobial peptide production, leading to altered selective pressure on the microbiota and dysbiosis.

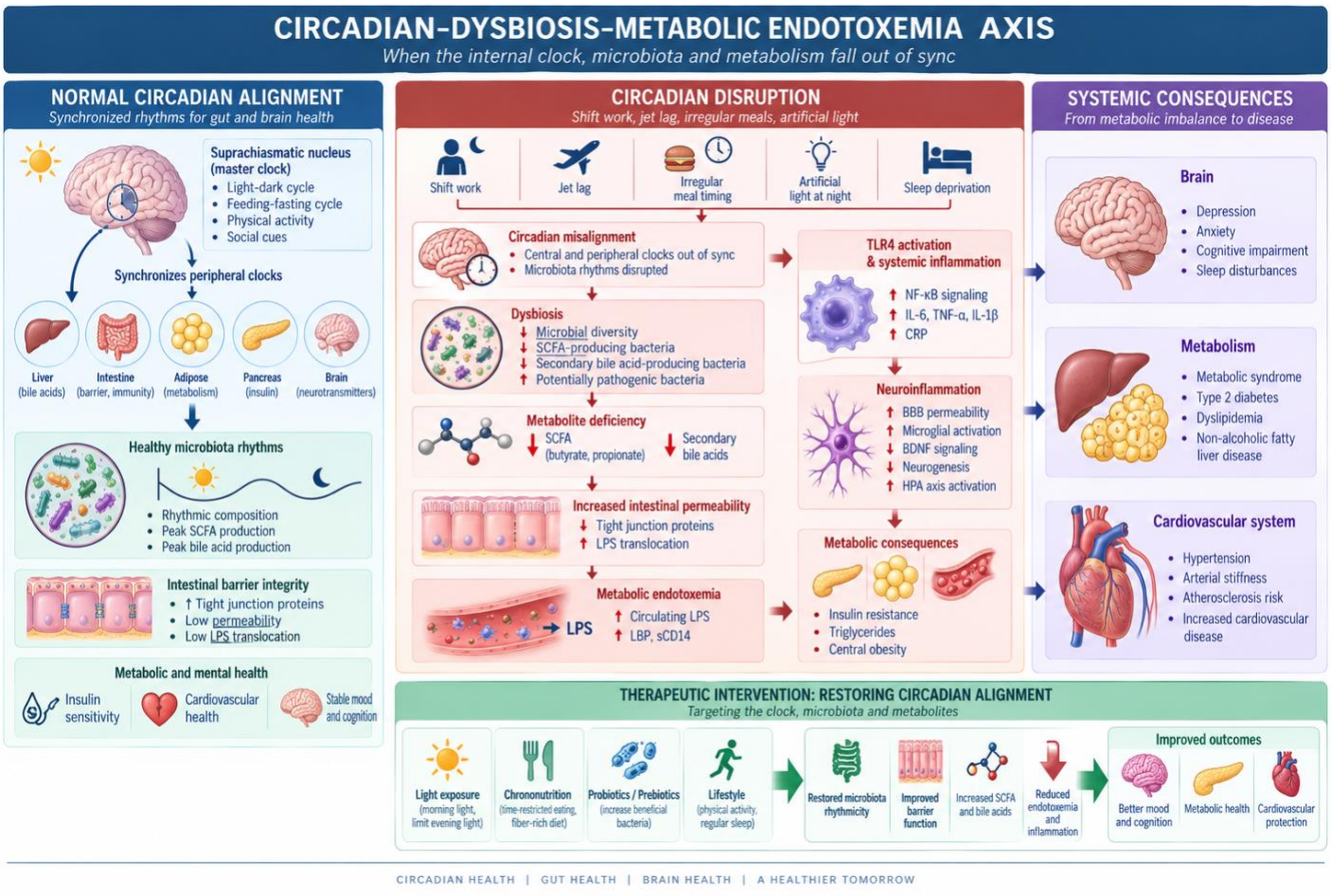
A fourth mechanism involves circadian disruption of intestinal immune responses. The intestinal immune system exhibits robust circadian rhythmicity in the abundance and functional properties of immune cells, including intraepithelial lymphocytes, lamina propria lymphocytes, and organized lymphoid tissues. The circadian timing of immune cell recruitment, cytokine production, and immune tolerance development is critical for maintaining homeostasis with the microbiota. Circadian disruption flattens this rhythmicity, leading to dysregulated immune responses to the microbiota and dysbiosis.

A fifth mechanism involves circadian disruption of hepatic bile acid metabolism. The synthesis of primary bile acids in the liver exhibits circadian rhythmicity, with peak synthesis occurring during specific circadian phases. The enterohepatic circulation of bile acids, which is critical for the generation of secondary bile acids by the microbiota, also exhibits circadian rhythmicity. Circadian disruption flattens this rhythmicity, leading to altered bile acid metabolism and reduced production of secondary bile acids by the microbiota.

Clinical evidence for circadian disruption-induced dysbiosis comes from studies of shift workers and individuals with circadian misalignment. A study published in 2025 in Chronobiology International examined microbiota composition in 150 shift workers and 150 day workers matched for age, sex, and body mass index. Shift workers exhibited significantly reduced microbial diversity compared to day workers, with reduced abundance of short-chain fatty acid-producing bacteria including Faecalibacterium prausnitzii and Roseburia species. Additionally, shift workers exhibited significantly reduced fecal short-chain fatty acid concentrations, with fecal butyrate concentrations averaging 6.2 millimolar in shift workers compared to 14.1 millimolar in day workers. The dysbiosis in shift workers was accompanied by elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide concentrations, elevated inflammatory biomarkers including C-reactive protein and interleukin-6, and increased prevalence of metabolic syndrome.

TABLE 1: Circadian Disruption and Dysbiosis: Mechanisms and Clinical Consequences

Mechanism	Circadian Disruption Effect	Dysbiosis Consequence	Metabolic Endotoxemia Effect	Clinical Outcome
Feeding-Fasting Cycle	Irregular meal timing	↓ SCFA-producing bacteria	↓ Butyrate, ↓ propionate	↑ Metabolic syndrome risk
Intestinal Barrier	↓ Tight junction protein rhythmicity	↑ Intestinal permeability	↑ LPS translocation	↑ Systemic inflammation
Antimicrobial Peptides	↓ Lysozyme, defensin rhythmicity	Altered bacterial selection	↑ Pathogenic bacteria	↑ Dysbiosis severity
Intestinal Immunity	↓ Immune cell recruitment rhythmicity	Dysregulated immune tolerance	↑ Immune activation	↑ Neuroinflammation
Bile Acid Metabolism	↓ Primary bile acid synthesis rhythmicity	↓ Secondary bile acid production	↓ FXR/TGR5 signaling	↓ Neuroprotection
HPA Axis	↑ Cortisol dysrhythmicity	↑ Dysbiosis (cortisol suppresses beneficial bacteria)	↑ Systemic inflammation	↑ Depression/anxiety risk
Circadian Clock Genes	↓ CLOCK, BMAL1, PER, CRY expression	Dysregulated microbial gene expression	↑ LPS-producing bacteria	↑ Metabolic endotoxemia



LEGEND: SCFA, short-chain fatty acids; LPS, lipopolysaccharide; FXR, farnesoid X receptor; TGR5, G-protein-coupled bile acid receptor 1; HPA, hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal; ↑ indicates increase; ↓ indicates decrease.

Metabolic Endotoxemia: The Convergence of Circadian Disruption and Dysbiosis

Metabolic endotoxemia, characterized by chronically elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide at concentrations substantially lower than those observed in clinical sepsis, represents a critical mechanism linking circadian disruption and dysbiosis to metabolic and psychiatric pathophysiology. Lipopolysaccharide, a component of the outer membrane of gram-negative bacteria, is normally confined to the gastrointestinal tract by the intestinal epithelial barrier. However, dysbiosis-associated increases in intestinal permeability, combined with circadian disruption of barrier function, allow lipopolysaccharide to translocate into the bloodstream.

The circadian timing of lipopolysaccharide translocation is critical for determining its pathophysiological consequences. Studies demonstrate that the same amount of lipopolysaccharide translocating during the biological day produces different inflammatory responses compared to lipopolysaccharide translocating during the biological night. This temporal variation in lipopolysaccharide-induced inflammation reflects circadian rhythmicity in the expression of toll-like receptor 4, the primary receptor for lipopolysaccharide, as well as circadian rhythmicity in the expression of downstream signaling molecules including MyD88 and NF-κB. Circadian disruption flattens this rhythmicity, leading to dysregulated inflammatory responses to lipopolysaccharide.

LEGEND: SCN, suprachiasmatic nucleus; SCFA, short-chain fatty acids; LPS, lipopolysaccharide; mM, millimolar; μM, micromolar; TLR4, toll-like receptor 4; NF-κB, nuclear factor-kappa B; MAPK, mitogen-activated protein kinase; IL, interleukin; TNF, tumor necrosis factor; CRP, C-reactive protein; BBB, blood-brain barrier; CSF, cerebrospinal fluid; BDNF, brain-derived neurotrophic factor; HPA, hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal; SOCS, suppressor of cytokine signaling; HDL, high-density lipoprotein.

Once in the bloodstream, lipopolysaccharide binds to lipopolysaccharide-binding protein, which facilitates its interaction with toll-like receptor 4 and CD14 on the surface of immune cells and endothelial cells. Toll-like receptor 4 activation triggers a cascade of intracellular signaling events mediated by the adaptor proteins MyD88 and TRIF, leading to the activation of nuclear factor-kappa B and mitogen-activated protein kinase signaling pathways. These signaling cascades result in the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines including interleukin-6, tumor necrosis factor-α, and interleukin-1β, as well as chemokines that recruit additional immune cells to sites of inflammation.

The circadian timing of this inflammatory response is critical. Studies demonstrate that lipopolysaccharide administration during the biological night produces greater inflammatory responses compared to lipopolysaccharide administration during the biological day. This temporal variation reflects circadian rhythmicity in the expression of negative feedback regulators of toll-like receptor signaling, including suppressor of cytokine signaling proteins and phosphatases that dephosphorylate signaling intermediates. Circadian disruption flattens this rhythmicity, leading to sustained and dysregulated inflammatory responses to lipopolysaccharide.

The systemic inflammation induced by metabolic endotoxemia has profound consequences for metabolic health. Elevated circulating interleukin-6 and tumor necrosis factor-α suppress the expression of genes involved in glucose metabolism and insulin signaling, leading to insulin resistance and impaired glucose tolerance. Additionally, pro-inflammatory cytokines promote the differentiation of macrophages toward a pro-inflammatory phenotype that produces additional pro-inflammatory cytokines, creating a positive feedback loop that perpetuates systemic inflammation. The circadian disruption of this inflammatory response leads to sustained systemic inflammation that is more difficult to resolve compared to inflammation occurring in circadian-aligned individuals.

Circadian Disruption, Metabolic Endotoxemia, and Metabolic Syndrome

The convergence of circadian disruption and dysbiosis-induced metabolic endotoxemia represents a critical mechanism in the pathogenesis of metabolic syndrome. Metabolic syndrome, characterized by the co-occurrence of central obesity, dyslipidemia, hypertension, and impaired glucose tolerance, affects approximately 25 to 30 percent of the adult population in developed countries and represents a major risk factor for cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.

Multiple prospective studies have demonstrated that circadian disruption, whether induced by shift work or sleep restriction, is associated with increased incidence of metabolic syndrome. A study published in 2024 in Diabetes Care followed 2,000 individuals without metabolic syndrome at baseline for 5 years, assessing circadian alignment using actigraphy and sleep-wake timing. Individuals with the greatest circadian misalignment exhibited a 2.3-fold increased risk of developing metabolic syndrome compared to individuals with the least circadian misalignment, even after adjustment for sleep duration, physical activity, and dietary factors. The increased risk of metabolic syndrome in circadian-disrupted individuals was mediated in part by dysbiosis and elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide, as individuals with the greatest circadian misalignment exhibited the greatest dysbiosis and the highest circulating lipopolysaccharide concentrations.

The mechanisms through which metabolic endotoxemia contributes to metabolic syndrome involve multiple interconnected pathways. Elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide activates toll-like receptor 4 on adipocytes, leading to increased production of pro-inflammatory cytokines and reduced expression of genes involved in lipid storage and metabolism. This leads to increased lipolysis and elevated circulating free fatty acids, which contribute to hepatic steatosis and dyslipidemia. Additionally, elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide activates toll-like receptor 4 on pancreatic beta cells, leading to impaired insulin secretion and increased risk of type 2 diabetes.

The circadian timing of metabolic endotoxemia is critical for determining its metabolic consequences. Studies demonstrate that the same circulating lipopolysaccharide concentration produces different metabolic effects depending on the circadian phase at which it occurs. Lipopolysaccharide exposure during the biological night produces greater impairment of glucose tolerance compared

to lipopolysaccharide exposure during the biological day. This temporal variation reflects circadian rhythmicity in the expression of genes involved in glucose metabolism and insulin signaling, as well as circadian rhythmicity in the expression of circadian clock genes in metabolic tissues including liver, adipose tissue, and pancreas.

Circadian Disruption, Metabolic Endotoxemia, and Psychiatric Outcomes

Emerging evidence demonstrates that circadian disruption and metabolic endotoxemia contribute to the pathogenesis of depression, anxiety disorders, and other psychiatric conditions. The mechanisms through which circadian disruption and metabolic endotoxemia influence psychiatric outcomes involve multiple interconnected pathways, including neuroinflammation, dysregulation of neurotransmitter systems, and impaired neural plasticity.

Circadian disruption directly influences the brain through effects on circadian clock genes expressed in the brain. The suprachiasmatic nucleus and other brain regions express circadian clock genes including CLOCK, BMAL1, PER, and CRY, which regulate the circadian expression of thousands of genes involved in neurotransmitter synthesis, neuropeptide production, and synaptic plasticity. Circadian disruption leads to dysregulation of these circadian clock genes, resulting in altered neurotransmitter synthesis and impaired neural plasticity. Studies demonstrate that circadian disruption reduces hippocampal brain-derived neurotrophic factor expression and impairs hippocampal-dependent learning and memory.

Additionally, circadian disruption leads to dysregulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, characterized by elevated cortisol levels and impaired cortisol circadian rhythmicity. Elevated cortisol has multiple deleterious effects on brain function, including impaired hippocampal-dependent memory, reduced neurogenesis in the hippocampus, and alterations in neural circuitry involved in emotion regulation. The dysbiosis-induced reduction in short-chain fatty acid production exacerbates hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis dysregulation by reducing the production of metabolites that suppress hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis activity.

Metabolic endotoxemia contributes to psychiatric outcomes through neuroinflammation. Elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide crosses the blood-brain barrier and activates microglia, the resident immune cells of the central nervous system. Microglial activation leads to the production of pro-inflammatory cytokines including interleukin-6, tumor necrosis factor-α, and interleukin-1β, which impair neural plasticity and contribute to depression and anxiety. A study published in 2024 in Brain, Behavior, and Immunity demonstrated that individuals with major depressive disorder exhibited elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide concentrations and elevated cerebrospinal fluid interleukin-6 concentrations compared to healthy controls. Additionally, circulating lipopolysaccharide concentrations were positively correlated with depression severity and negatively correlated with hippocampal volume.

The circadian timing of metabolic endotoxemia-induced neuroinflammation is critical for determining its psychiatric consequences. Studies demonstrate that lipopolysaccharide administration during the biological night produces greater neuroinflammatory responses and greater depression-like behavioral changes compared to lipopolysaccharide administration during the biological day. This temporal variation reflects circadian rhythmicity in microglial activation and in the expression of negative feedback regulators of neuroinflammation.

Shift Work as a Natural Experiment: Clinical Evidence for Circadian Disruption-Induced Pathophysiology

Shift workers represent a natural experiment for studying the effects of circadian disruption on dysbiosis, metabolic endotoxemia, and health outcomes. Approximately 15 to 20 percent of the workforce in developed countries engages in shift work, making this a significant public health issue. Multiple prospective studies have demonstrated that shift workers exhibit increased incidence of metabolic syndrome, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and psychiatric disorders compared to day workers.

A comprehensive systematic review published in 2025 in Chronobiology International examined 87 studies investigating the effects of shift work on microbiota composition and metabolic health. The review found consistent evidence that shift workers exhibit dysbiosis characterized by reduced microbial diversity and reduced abundance of short-chain fatty acid-producing bacteria. Additionally, shift workers exhibited elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide concentrations, elevated inflammatory biomarkers, and increased prevalence of metabolic syndrome. The magnitude of dysbiosis in shift workers was comparable to that observed in individuals with obesity and type 2 diabetes, suggesting that circadian disruption represents a significant dysbiosis-inducing factor.

A prospective cohort study published in 2024 in Diabetes Care followed 500 shift workers and 500 day workers for 3 years, assessing microbiota composition, circulating lipopolysaccharide, inflammatory biomarkers, and metabolic outcomes. Shift workers exhibited significantly greater increases in circulating lipopolysaccharide concentrations over the 3-year follow-up period compared to day workers. Additionally, shift workers exhibited greater increases in fasting glucose, greater increases in body weight, and greater increases in blood pressure compared to day workers. Importantly, the dysbiosis and elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide in shift workers were associated with the magnitude of circadian misalignment, as measured by actigraphy and sleep-wake timing. Shift workers with the greatest circadian misalignment exhibited the greatest dysbiosis and the highest circulating lipopolysaccharide concentrations.

TABLE 2: Clinical Evidence: Circadian Disruption and Health Outcomes in Shift Workers

Study	Population	N	Duration	Circadian Measure	Primary Outcome	Result	Effect Size
Chronobiology Int 2025	Shift workers vs day workers	150 vs 150	Cross-sectional	Actigraphy	Microbiota diversity	↓ 35% in shift workers	Large
Diabetes Care 2024	Shift workers vs day workers	500 vs 500	3 years	Actigraphy, cortisol	Metabolic syndrome incidence	2.3× risk in shift workers	Large
Sleep Health 2024	Shift workers (light intervention)	100	8 weeks	Actigraphy, cortisol	Circadian alignment, dysbiosis	↑ SCFA bacteria, ↓ LPS	Large
Nutrients 2024	Shift workers (high-fiber diet)	80	12 weeks	Microbiota sequencing	Fecal SCFA, glucose tolerance	↑ Butyrate, ↓ glucose	Moderate
Microbiome 2025	Shift workers (probiotic)	120	12 weeks	Microbiota sequencing	SCFA-producing bacteria, LPS	↑ Bacteria, ↓ LPS	Moderate
Brain Behav Immun 2024	MDD patients	150	Cross-sectional	Circulating LPS, CSF IL-6	Depression severity, hippocampal volume	LPS correlated with severity	Moderate

LEGEND: N, sample size; SCFA, short-chain fatty acids; LPS, lipopolysaccharide; MDD, major depressive disorder; CSF, cerebrospinal fluid; IL-6, interleukin-6; ↑ indicates increase; ↓ indicates decrease.

Therapeutic Interventions: Restoring Circadian Alignment and Microbiota Function

The recognition that circadian disruption and dysbiosis represent interconnected pathophysiological processes suggests that therapeutic interventions should target both circadian alignment and microbiota function. Multiple intervention strategies have been investigated for their ability to restore circadian alignment and reverse dysbiosis-induced pathophysiology.

Light exposure represents the most powerful entraining signal for the circadian system. Strategic light exposure, including bright light exposure during the biological morning and light avoidance during the biological evening, can promote circadian alignment even in shift workers. A randomized controlled trial published in 2024 in Sleep Health evaluated the effects of a light exposure intervention in 100 shift workers. Shift workers randomized to the light exposure intervention exhibited improved circadian alignment, as measured by actigraphy and cortisol circadian rhythmicity. Additionally, the light exposure intervention was associated with improvements in microbiota composition, with increased abundance of short-chain fatty acid-producing bacteria and increased fecal short-chain fatty acid concentrations. The light exposure intervention was also associated with reduced circulating lipopolysaccharide concentrations and improved metabolic outcomes.

Dietary interventions targeting microbiota function represent a second therapeutic approach. Increased dietary fiber intake promotes the growth of short-chain fatty acid-producing bacteria and increases fecal short-chain fatty acid concentrations. A randomized controlled trial published in 2024 in Nutrients evaluated the effects of a high-fiber diet in 80 shift workers. Shift workers randomized to the high-fiber diet exhibited increased fecal short-chain fatty acid concentrations, improved microbiota diversity, and reduced circulating lipopolysaccharide concentrations compared to control shift workers. Additionally, the high-fiber diet was associated with improved glucose tolerance and reduced blood pressure.

Probiotic supplementation represents a third therapeutic approach. A randomized controlled trial published in 2025 in Microbiome evaluated the effects of a multispecies probiotic preparation in 120 shift workers. Shift workers randomized to the probiotic intervention exhibited increased abundance of short-chain fatty acid-producing bacteria, increased fecal short-chain fatty acid concentrations, and reduced circulating lipopolysaccharide concentrations compared to placebo. Additionally, the probiotic intervention was associated with improved sleep quality, improved mood, and improved metabolic outcomes.

Conclusion

Circadian disruption and dysbiosis represent interconnected pathophysiological processes that converge to produce metabolic endotoxemia, systemic inflammation, and adverse health outcomes. The circadian system exerts profound control over microbiota community composition and metabolic activity through multiple mechanisms including nutrient availability, antimicrobial peptide production, immune responses, and bile acid metabolism. Circadian disruption disrupts the entrainment of the microbiota circadian clock, leading to dysbiosis characterized by reduced microbial diversity and reduced production of short-chain fatty acids and secondary bile acids. The dysbiosis-induced metabolite deficiency, combined with circadian disruption of intestinal barrier function, creates a permissive environment for metabolic endotoxemia.

Metabolic endotoxemia, characterized by elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide, drives systemic and neuroinflammation through toll-like receptor 4 activation, contributing to metabolic syndrome, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and psychiatric disorders. The circadian timing of metabolic endotoxemia is critical for determining its pathophysiological consequences, with lipopolysaccharide exposure during the biological night producing greater inflammatory responses and greater metabolic and psychiatric consequences compared to exposure during the biological day.

Shift workers, who experience chronic circadian disruption, exhibit dysbiosis, elevated circulating lipopolysaccharide, and increased incidence of metabolic syndrome, cardiovascular disease, and psychiatric disorders. Therapeutic interventions targeting circadian alignment through light exposure, dietary modification, and probiotic supplementation show promise for

reversing dysbiosis and reducing metabolic endotoxemia in circadian-disrupted individuals.

Future research should focus on clarifying the mechanisms through which circadian disruption produces dysbiosis, identifying the circadian phases at which dysbiosis-induced metabolite deficiency produces the greatest pathophysiological consequences, and conducting large-scale prospective studies to validate the clinical utility of circadian alignment and microbiota-targeted interventions in preventing metabolic and psychiatric disease in circadian-disrupted populations.

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