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Emerging neural mechanisms underlying recovery and adaptation after spinal cord injury.

Elena Rossi*

Department of Neurophysiology, University of Milan, Italy.

***Correspondence to:** Elena Rossi**,** Department of Neurophysiology, University of Milan, Italy, E-mail: e.rossi@unimi.edu

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Introduction

Spinal cord injury (SCI) remains one of the most debilitating neurological conditions, leading to permanent motor and sensory impairments. Despite significant advances in acute care and rehabilitation, complete functional recovery remains elusive. The spinal cord's limited regenerative potential poses a major challenge, as injured axons fail to reconnect with their original targets due to inhibitory molecular environments and scar formation. Recent progress in molecular neurobiology and neural repair strategies, however, offers renewed hope. Understanding the neural mechanisms that underlie adaptive plasticity and functional reorganization is central to developing effective neurorehabilitation strategies [1].

Post-injury plasticity involves dynamic structural and functional changes within spared neural circuits both above and below the lesion site. Studies using advanced neuroimaging and electrophysiological tools have revealed that residual spinal interneurons and propriospinal pathways contribute to partial motor recovery. Rehabilitation interventions, such as locomotor training and robotic-assisted gait therapy, exploit this plasticity by promoting task-specific neural activation and reweighting of synaptic inputs. These approaches stimulate corticospinal tract reorganization and facilitate compensatory motor control, offering patients partial restoration of voluntary movement. Importantly, combining neurorehabilitation with pharmacological modulation of inhibitory pathways has shown potential to further enhance synaptic connectivity [2].

Beyond the spinal cord itself, cortical and subcortical regions undergo extensive reorganization after SCI. Functional MRI studies have demonstrated that the motor cortex expands its representation of unaffected body parts, while adjacent areas take over functions lost due to injury. This cortical remapping underlies adaptive compensations and highlights the brain's remarkable capacity for reorganization. Cognitive and emotional factors, such as motivation, attention, and psychological resilience, play crucial roles in mediating neuroplastic responses. Consequently, effective rehabilitation programs must integrate both neurophysiological and cognitive-behavioral interventions to maximize recovery potential [3].

Technological innovations have accelerated the progress of SCI rehabilitation. Brain-computer interfaces (BCIs), for example, allow patients to control external devices or stimulate paralyzed limbs directly through neural signals, bridging the gap between intention and action. Coupled with neuromodulation techniques such as epidural electrical stimulation (EES), BCIs can restore

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locomotor patterns and even voluntary movement in chronic SCI patients. These multimodal approaches harness both neuroplastic and neuroprosthetic mechanisms, representing a paradigm shift toward integrative neurorehabilitation strategies. However, their clinical implementation requires careful consideration of ethical, safety, and accessibility issues [4].

Despite growing optimism, translation of these breakthroughs into routine clinical practice remains challenging. Variability in injury type, extent, and patient-specific factors complicates therapeutic outcomes. Moreover, the integration of emerging technologies into standardized protocols demands multidisciplinary collaboration among neuroscientists, engineers, and clinicians. Long-term studies focusing on functional outcomes and quality of life are essential to validate these approaches. The future of SCI rehabilitation lies in personalized, adaptive models that combine biological repair, neurotechnology, and behavioral training for optimized functional recovery [5].

Conclusion

Recovery after spinal cord injury depends on a complex interplay of molecular repair, neural plasticity, and behavioral adaptation. Advances in neurophysiology, coupled with emerging technologies like BCIs and electrical stimulation, have significantly expanded the therapeutic landscape. By integrating biological, cognitive, and technological dimensions, future neurorehabilitation strategies hold the promise of restoring not just movement, but autonomy and quality of life for individuals living with SCI.

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