

Small extracellular vesicles as emerging biomarkers and therapeutic targets in neurodegenerative diseases

Askarova Zebo Zafarjonovna ^{a,*}, Elmuratova Aysulu ^b, Sanoeva Matlyuba ^c, Hamroyev Rashid ^d, Jurakulov Bakhrom Azamatovich ^e, Ahmadjonov Ahmadjon ^f, Amirullayeva Barno ^g, Azimova Mayram Kurbanovna ^h, Mahsudali Rohataliyev Mahmudali ugli ⁱ, Iskandarova Shaxodat ^j, Turakulov Rustam ^k, Matrizaeva Gulnara Jumaniyazovna ^l, Alisher Ishankulov ^m

^a Department of Obstetrics and gynecology of Samarkand State Medical University, Samarkand, Uzbekistan

^b Department of Pedagogy and Psychology, University of Innovative Technologies, Uzbekistan

^c Department of Neurology, Bukhara State Medical Institute, Bukhara, Uzbekistan

^d Department of basic medical sciences, Termez University of Economics and Service, Termez, Uzbekistan

^e Department of Agronomy, Navoi State University of Mining and Technology, Navoi, Uzbekistan

^f Kokand University Andijan branch, Andijan city, Babur branch street, Andijon, 170100, Uzbekistan

^g Department of Pedagogy of the University of Economics and Pedagogy, Karshi, Uzbekistan

^h The Fergana Medical Institute of Public Health, Fergana, Uzbekistan

ⁱ Department of Psychology of pedagogy, Tashkent state technical university named after Islam Karimov, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

^j Department of Foreign Philology faculty, Urgench state pedagogical institute, Uzbekistan

^k Department of internal medicine in family medicine, Tashkent State Medical University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

^l Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Oncology, Urgench State Medical Institute, Urgench, Uzbekistan

^m Kimyo international university in Tashkent branch Samarkand, Uzbekistan

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Small extracellular vesicles
Neurodegenerative diseases
Biomarkers
Nanotherapeutics
Neuroinflammation

ABSTRACT

Small extracellular vesicles (sEVs) have rapidly emerged as versatile mediators of intercellular communication with significant potential to transform the diagnosis and treatment of neurodegenerative diseases (NDDs). Increasing evidence shows that sEVs not only participate in the propagation of pathogenic proteins but also serve as accessible, CNS-informative carriers of molecular signatures that reflect neuronal, glial, and systemic disease processes. This dual role positions sEVs at the intersection of biomarker discovery and therapeutic innovation. In the diagnostic domain, advances in immunoaffinity capture, single-vesicle analysis, and multi-omics profiling have enabled increasingly precise characterization of neuron-, astrocyte-, and microglia-derived sEVs, revealing candidate markers for Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and related disorders. However, translation remains limited by methodological heterogeneity, a lack of large-scale validation, and the need for standardized pre-analytical and analytical pipelines aligned with the ISEV/MISEV guidelines. On the therapeutic front, native and engineered sEVs, particularly those derived from mesenchymal and neural stem cells, demonstrate promising neuroprotective effects, including the modulation of neuroinflammation; the enhancement of synaptic resilience; and the delivery of antioxidant, anti-amyloid, or gene-modifying cargo across the blood–brain barrier. Scalable GMP manufacturing, cargo-loading strategies, targeting specificity, and long-term safety remain key challenges for clinical translation. This narrative review synthesizes current advances in sEV-based biomarkers and therapeutics, outlines technological and regulatory barriers, and proposes a translational roadmap spanning mechanistic discovery, platform standardization, and integration into precision-medicine frameworks. Collectively, emerging data position sEVs as powerful tools capable of reshaping the diagnostic and therapeutic landscape of NDDs, provided that coordinated multidisciplinary efforts address the remaining gaps in validation, scalability, and regulatory readiness.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: askarovazebo79@gmail.com (A.Z. Zafarjonovna).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cca.2026.120932>

Received 10 February 2026; Received in revised form 23 February 2026; Accepted 25 February 2026

Available online 26 February 2026

0009-8981/© 2026 Elsevier B.V. All rights are reserved, including those for text and data mining, AI training, and similar technologies.

1. Introduction

Neurodegenerative diseases (NDDs), such as Alzheimer's disease (AD), Parkinson's disease (PD), Huntington's disease (HD), and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), are chronic, progressive disorders characterized by the selective loss of neuronal populations and synaptic dysfunction, leading to cognitive, motor, and behavioral decline [1–3]. The incidence of this disease is increasing sharply with increasing global population age, creating urgent medical, social, and economic burdens. Despite advances in symptomatic management, current therapies largely fail to halt or reverse disease progression, underscoring the need for earlier diagnosis, mechanism-based biomarkers, and disease-modifying interventions [4–6]. Traditional biofluid and neuroimaging biomarkers, while informative, often lack sensitivity for preclinical stages, require invasive sampling (e.g., cerebrospinal fluid), or are constrained by cost and accessibility, limiting their utility for population-level screening and longitudinal monitoring [7–9].

In this context, small extracellular vesicles (sEVs), a size-defined subset of extracellular vesicles (EVs) of approximately 30–150 nm, have emerged from being viewed as cellular waste products to being recognized as active mediators of intercellular communication and key players in NDD biology [10,11]. EVs are lipid bilayer-encapsulated particles released by virtually all cell types that lack self-replication capacity and carry complex cargoes of proteins, lipids, and nucleic acids reflecting the (patho)physiological state of their cell of origin. According to recent ISEV-aligned frameworks, EVs are operationally classified by size and biogenesis into small EVs (sEVs; <200 nm), larger microvesicles, and apoptotic bodies, with sEVs typically arising from multivesicular bodies and displaying enriched regulatory cargo such as microRNAs (miRNAs), mRNAs, and long non-coding RNAs [12].

Within the central nervous system (CNS), sEVs are released by neurons, astrocytes, microglia, oligodendrocytes, and other brain-associated cells and participate in processes ranging from neuronal development and synaptic plasticity to neuroinflammation and repair [13–15]. Crucially, sEVs can cross the blood–brain barrier (BBB) bidirectionally, allowing brain-derived vesicles to be detected in peripheral biofluids such as plasma, serum, and saliva and enabling peripherally administered vesicles to access CNS targets [15]. These properties position sEVs as an attractive interface between brain pathology and minimally invasive “liquid biopsy” strategies.

Accumulating evidence implicates sEVs in the propagation of hallmark pathogenic proteins across neural circuits. Misfolded or aggregation-prone species, including amyloid- β and tau in AD, α -synuclein in PD, TDP-43 in ALS, and mutant huntingtin in HD, have been detected within sEVs and other EV subtypes, supporting a vesicle-mediated, prion-like transfer of toxic cargo that may underlie stereotyped spatiotemporal spreading of pathology [16,17]. sEV secretion can be upregulated as a compensatory response to lysosomal or proteostatic stress, facilitating the removal of misfolded proteins while inadvertently exporting pathogenic material to recipient cells. Parallel alterations in EV-associated miRNA profiles, including disease- and vesicle-size-specific signatures, further suggest a role for sEVs in dysregulating gene expression networks relevant to ubiquitin-proteasome function, innate immune signaling, and synaptic maintenance. Thus, sEVs play dual roles as both propagators of neuropathology and potential endogenous mechanisms of detoxification or neuroprotection, depending on context, cellular origin, and cargo composition [18].

From a biomarker perspective, the molecular content of sEVs offers several advantages over conventional soluble analytes. sEV membranes shield embedded proteins and nucleic acids from enzymatic degradation, improving their stability and enabling the detection of low-abundance, disease-relevant species. Cell-type-enriched vesicle populations, such as neuron-derived or astrocyte-derived sEVs immunocaptured from blood, can report on compartment-specific pathophysiology within the CNS and have been shown to differentiate NDD patients from controls and to track cognitive or motor impairment [19].

Importantly, emerging data suggest that sEV-based biomarkers may outperform traditional cerebrospinal fluid markers for early detection and longitudinal monitoring in some NDD contexts.

Concurrently, sEVs are being intensively explored as therapeutic tools and targets. Mesenchymal stem cell-derived sEVs and other stem cell-derived vesicles recapitulate many of the neuroprotective, immunomodulatory, and pro-regenerative properties of their parental cells while exhibiting lower immunogenicity, easier storage and handling, and avoidance of the safety and ethical concerns associated with cell transplantation [20]. In preclinical models of AD, PD, and other NDDs, unmodified or engineered sEVs have been used to deliver miRNAs, siRNAs, neurotrophic factors, proteases (e.g., β -degrading enzymes), and other therapeutic cargoes across the BBB, leading to reduced protein aggregation, attenuated neuroinflammation, and improved functional outcomes [20]. Moreover, strategies that inhibit the release, uptake, or pathological cargo loading of disease-promoting sEVs are being evaluated as novel disease-modifying approaches.

Despite these advances, major translational challenges remain, including standardization of sEV isolation and characterization, scalable manufacturing with robust quality control, precise definition of vesicle identity and potency, and harmonization of regulatory frameworks across agencies. Innovative solutions such as CRISPR-based barcoding for in vivo tracking of vesicle biodistribution, AI-assisted analytics for cargo profiling, and evolving MISEV-2023 guidelines for minimal reporting standards are beginning to address these gaps and will be critical for clinical translation. Therefore, small extracellular vesicles have emerged as a convergent focus for NDD research, integrating mechanistic insights into disease propagation with opportunities for biomarker discovery and targeted therapy. The present narrative review synthesizes current knowledge on sEV biology in neurodegeneration, emphasizing their roles as emerging biomarkers and therapeutic targets across major NDDs and highlighting conceptual and practical priorities for advancing sEV-based strategies toward clinical impact.

2. Biogenesis, Classification, and Molecular Cargo of Small Extracellular Vesicles

Small extracellular vesicles (sEVs), which often operationally overlap with exosomes (~30–150 nm), are generated through endosomal trafficking and multivesicular body (MVB) formation. In neurons and glia, inward budding of the late endosomal membrane produces intraluminal vesicles (ILVs); subsequent fusion of MVBs with the plasma membrane releases these ILVs as sEVs into the extracellular space [21,22]. In contrast, larger microvesicles/ectosomes are shed by outward budding of the plasma membrane, and apoptotic bodies are derived from the blebbing of dying cells, providing a size- and biogenesis-based classification framework for extracellular vesicles (EVs) in the nervous system [23,24].

In experimental neurodegeneration models, EV biogenesis is dynamically regulated. After spinal cord injury in mice, proteins involved in EV formation are upregulated at the lesion site, and tetraspanin markers (CD9, CD63, and CD81) increase in multiple CNS cell types, indicating enhanced vesicle production under neuroinflammatory stress [25]. Similarly, in Alzheimer's disease (AD) models, acid sphingomyelinase (ASM) and its product ceramide lipid regulators of EV budding and cargo association are enriched in brain-derived sEVs, particularly in females, which is consistent with ceramide-dependent facilitation of β binding to vesicle membranes. The inhibition of ASM reduces β -ceramide complex formation and alters sEV output in astrocytes, directly linking lipid-dependent biogenesis mechanisms to disease-related vesicle composition [26].

Within the CNS, sEVs are released by neurons, astrocytes, oligodendrocytes, microglia, and neural stem or progenitor cells and can be recovered from brain tissue, cerebrospinal fluid, and peripheral blood [27]. Quantitative nanoparticle tracking and electron microscopy in AD mouse brains revealed median sEV diameters of approximately

110–120 nm and high particle numbers, with proteomic enrichment of canonical EV markers and endocytosis-related pathways, confirming their endosomal origin. Novel isolation methods from unfixed frozen brains further demonstrated that CNS sEVs meet current size, morphology, and marker criteria, with minimal contamination from intracellular organelles [26].

The molecular cargo of sEVs is highly complex and disease-modulated. High-resolution proteomics of brain-derived EVs from AD transgenic mice revealed 3444 unique proteins enriched with neuron-, astrocyte-, oligodendrocyte-, and microglia-specific molecules as well as endocytic and synaptic components. AD-model sEVs present increased levels of presenilin-1, amyloid precursor protein (APP), and microglial Itgax (a disease-associated microglia marker), implicating the A β -processing machinery and neurodegenerative microglia in vesicle secretion. Proteomic analysis of sEVs from neuropathic pain and stress models similarly revealed disease-specific enrichment of complement proteins, adhesion molecules, and astrocytic cytosolic proteins, reflecting selective sorting rather than passive shedding [28,29].

Pathogenic proteins central to neurodegenerative diseases are frequently detected in EV cargo. Brain- and CSF-derived EVs from AD and familial AD systems carry A β and tau, whereas EVs from APP/PS1 or post-mortem AD brains transmit tau and A β and can induce memory impairment or aberrant tau phosphorylation when injected into the hippocampus of wild-type mice [30]. In Parkinson's disease (PD), CSF-derived EVs contain soluble and aggregated α -synuclein; these vesicles catalyze α -synuclein nucleation and are more efficiently taken up and more toxic than free protein, supporting vesicle-mediated prion-like spread [31]. Astrocyte-derived EVs in HIV-associated neurocognitive

disorders shuttle amyloid species and induce synaptodendritic injury and behavioral deficits in vivo, with HIF-1 α signaling regulating both EV biogenesis and amyloid cargo loading.

Nucleic acids constitute a second major cargo class. Plasma or tissue sEVs from CNS injury and neurodegenerative models show robust changes in microRNA (miRNA) profiles. After SCI, circulating CD81⁺ sEVs exhibit miRNA signatures resembling those of activated astrocytes, and their intracerebral injection alters inflammatory and reactive astrocyte gene expression in the cortex. Mesenchymal stem cell-derived sEVs modulate microglial polarization and neuroinflammation via specific miRNAs (e.g., miR-467f, miR-466q, and miR-486) that target the MAPK and PTEN/Akt pathways, promoting M2-like phenotypes and neurogenesis in experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis and ischemic stroke [32,33]. In PD models, circulating EVs carry tRNA-derived fragments such as tRF-02514, which regulate autophagy and microglial pyroptosis; inhibition of this EV-borne RNA protects dopaminergic neurons and delays disease progression [34]. Neural stem cells and umbilical cord-derived sEVs similarly transport miR-124-3p and other neurogenic or synaptic miRNAs, enhancing neuronal differentiation, mitochondrial function, and synaptic protein expression in AD and PD models [35].

Together, primary experimental data show that sEVs in neurodegenerative and neuroinflammatory conditions arise predominantly from the endosomal pathway, are classified within the small EV/exosome size range, and carry a selectively sorted cargo of pathogenic proteins, immunomodulatory lipids, and regulatory non-coding RNAs that both mirror and modulate disease processes across the CNS and periphery.

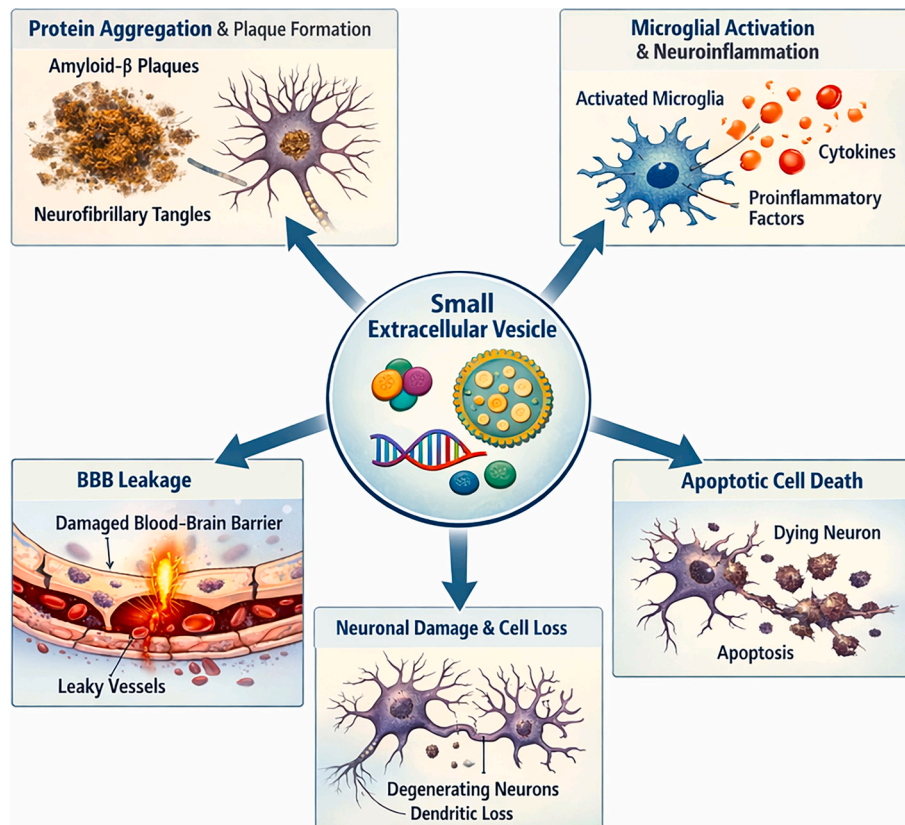


Fig. 1. Pathological effects of small extracellular vesicles (sEVs) in the brain. Small extracellular vesicles released under pathological conditions contribute to multiple neurodegenerative processes. sEVs can propagate misfolded proteins, promoting amyloid- β plaque deposition and neurofibrillary tangle formation. They stimulate microglial activation and amplify neuroinflammation through cytokine and proinflammatory factor release. sEV cargo also triggers apoptotic pathways, leading to neuronal cell death. In parallel, they exacerbate neuronal damage and loss, including dendritic degeneration. Additionally, sEV-mediated signaling disrupts the blood-brain barrier (BBB), resulting in vascular leakage and impaired neurovascular integrity. Collectively, these mechanisms illustrate the multifaceted role of sEVs in driving neurodegenerative pathology.

3. Mechanisms of sEV-mediated Pathogenesis in Neurodegenerative Disorders

Experimental studies have shown that small extracellular vesicles (sEVs) contribute to neurodegeneration through several interconnected mechanisms: propagation of misfolded proteins, induction of neuroinflammation and glial activation, disruption of autophagy and cell death pathways, and modulation of synaptic and mitochondrial function (Fig. 1).

In Parkinson's disease (PD), sEVs provide a catalytic microenvironment that promotes α -synuclein misfolding and prion-like propagation. Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF)-derived EVs from PD patients contain soluble and aggregated α -synuclein; these vesicle-bound oligomers are taken up more efficiently and are more toxic to recipient cells than free α -synuclein, and EVs enhance the nucleation and aggregation of the protein in vitro [31]. Short intranasal administration of PD CSF-EVs to healthy mice induces widespread midbrain α -synuclein aggregation, dopaminergic neurodegeneration, neuroinflammation, and autophagy alterations, along with motor and non-motor PD-like symptoms, demonstrating that human disease-derived EVs can initiate and propagate pathology in vivo.

Environmental toxins can further aggravate this process. Manganese exposure in α -synuclein-expressing dopaminergic neurons drives the secretion of misfolded α -synuclein in exosomes; these exosomes transfer α -synuclein to microglia and neurons, accelerating cell-to-cell aggregation and dopaminergic neurotoxicity in mouse models, and serum exosomes from manganese-exposed welders show increased misfolded α -synuclein levels, which are linked to metal exposure, exosomal trafficking, and the risk of synucleinopathy [36].

Tau pathology is also EV-mediated. Brain-derived EVs from human tau transgenic mice contain high levels of human tau capable of seeding aggregation; genetic deletion of the neuronal protein Arc markedly reduces tau loading into EVs and abolishes their seeding capacity, indicating that Arc-dependent EV packaging is a key mechanism for intercellular tau transmission [37]. EVs from Alzheimer's disease (AD) and frontotemporal dementia (FTD) brains carry tau and A β and, when injected into the hippocampus of wild-type or humanized tau mice, induce memory impairment and are associated with proteomic changes in synapse-related proteins, supporting a direct contribution of disease EVs to synaptic dysfunction and cognitive decline [22].

sEVs can cross the blood-brain barrier (BBB) and modulate glial cells. Peripheral blood sEVs from aged mice, but not from young animals, enter the brains of young mice and rapidly alter the expression of glial activation genes; the astrocytic marker GFAP is significantly upregulated, indicating robust astrocyte activation and linking age-related peripheral vesicles to central neuroinflammation [38]. Plasma exosomes injected into the hippocampus of AD model mice diffuse through the hippocampus and cortex, preferentially target microglia, and cluster around β -amyloid plaques, where they are engulfed by activated microglia, suggesting that circulating exosomes participate in plaque-microglia dynamics and local inflammatory responses [39].

In PD, serum-derived EVs carrying the tRNA-fragment tRF-02514 promote microglial pyroptosis and inflammation by targeting ATG5 and inhibiting autophagy, which accelerates neuronal loss; inhibition of this EV-borne RNA reverses these effects, decreases inflammatory factor release, and protects dopaminergic neurons in vivo [34]. Misfolded SOD1 in ALS models localizes to vacuoles containing EV markers and the necroptosis effector pMLKL in vulnerable motor neurons, supporting a mechanism in which EVs released from damaged neurons via secretion or necroptotic disruption act as triggers for early microgliosis, glial-mediated neurotoxicity, and disease spread [40].

Proteomic profiling of brain-derived EVs from AD model mice revealed enrichment of APP, presenilin-1, and the disease-associated microglial marker Itgax, linking A β -processing complexes and neurodegenerative microglia to EV secretion [23]. EVs from AD and FTD brains show altered synapse-related proteomes, and their intracerebral

injection causes memory impairment, indicating that EV cargo can directly disrupt synaptic regulation and plasticity [22].

Neural stem cell-derived EVs in APP/PS1 mice improve cognition without reducing the A β burden but increase the expression of mitochondrial biogenesis regulators (PGC-1 α , NRF1/2), SIRT1, and synaptic proteins (GAP43, synaptophysin, PSD95) while lowering oxidative damage and microglial markers, indicating that disease-modifying actions of EVs can occur through the restoration of mitochondrial and synaptic homeostasis and the suppression of neuroinflammation, even as endogenous pathogenic EVs propagate toxic proteins [35].

sEVs are also involved in systemic inflammatory cascades relevant to neurodegeneration. In SOD1 ALS mice, spinal cord proteomics and transcriptomics show marked overactivation of complement and coagulation cascades and NF- κ B signaling; therapeutic intranasal sEV administration suppresses these pathways and glial responses, improving motor neuron survival and function, underscoring that the same vesicular routes used for pathogenic signaling can also be harnessed to counteract disease-driving inflammation [41].

4. sEVs from Distinct CNS and Peripheral Cell Types: Neurons, Glia, and Beyond

Small extracellular vesicles (sEVs) in neurodegenerative contexts arise from multiple CNS cell types, diverse glial populations, neural stem cells and peripheral tissues, each contributing a characteristic molecular signature and functional profile. The cell-s of- origin strongly shape the sEV proteome and transcriptome, determining how vesicles influence disease progression and repair. Human iPSC-derived excitatory neurons secrete EVs enriched in the neuronal membrane and synaptic proteins such as ATP1A3 and NCAM1, which were identified as neuron-specific EV markers in an unbiased proteomic screen. Network analysis of brain-derived EVs from controls, mild cognitive impairment patients, and Alzheimer's disease (AD) patients revealed that neuron-enriched EV modules were relatively depleted as astrocyte-enriched modules increased with pathology, suggesting a shift in EV contribution from neurons to glia during disease [42].

In primary murine cultures, neuronal sEV transcriptomes contain thousands of full-length mRNAs, which are selectively packaged relative to bulk cell lysate. These mRNAs include synaptic signaling and ribosomal transcripts, with ~80% of neural sEV mRNAs being full-length and potentially translatable in recipient cells. In the AD brain, neuronal sEVs are relatively depleted of synaptic mRNAs compared with those in the non-diseased brain, indicating the loss of neuron-derived homeostatic signaling [43].

Astrocyte-like cells produce EVs distinguished by surface proteins such as LRP1 and ITGA6 and an astrocyte-enriched proteome. When these cell-type signatures are projected onto human brain-derived EV datasets, an astrocyte-EV module is the one most strongly associated with AD pathology and cognitive impairment. Within this module, the hub protein integrin- β 1 (ITGB1) is significantly elevated in astrocyte-enriched EVs from AD brains and is correlated with A β and tau burdens in independent human cohorts, directly linking astrocyte-derived EV signaling to disease severity [42].

Astrocyte sEVs also carry distinct mRNA repertoires. In murine primary astrocytes, sEVs are enriched in transcripts related to lipid metabolism, cytokine signaling, and the extracellular matrix, differing clearly from the neuronal and microglial sEV transcriptomes [43]. These cargo patterns support a role for astrocyte-derived sEVs in modulating neuroinflammation, synaptic support, and vascular interactions.

Microglia- such as iPSC-derived cells release EVs marked by ITGAM and LCP1, forming a microglia-specific EV signature. In AD brain-derived EVs, microglial markers are prominent within inflammatory modules, supporting microglial vesicles as major carriers of immune mediators [42].

Cell-specific cultures combined with long-read sequencing revealed that microglial sEVs are enriched in full-length mRNAs related to

cytokine production, interferon responses, chemokines, and immune receptors [43]. This immune-skewed transcriptome aligns with evidence that microglial sEVs in AD brains present increased interferon- γ/β response transcripts and high levels of ApoE, MS4A4A, and MS4A6A mRNAs, genes strongly linked to neuroinflammatory risk [44]. These data support microglial sEVs as key vectors of inflammatory and lipid-handling signals in neurodegeneration.

Oligodendrocyte-like cells secrete EVs containing markers such as LAMP2 and FTH1, forming an oligodendrocyte-specific signature distinct from that of neuronal or astrocytic EVs. Mapping these signatures onto human brain EV proteomes suggests that oligodendrocyte-EV modules participate in myelin and iron-handling pathways that become altered across the AD continuum [42].

In addition to classical brain glia, Müller glia in the retina also generate neuroactive sEVs. In a mouse optic nerve crush model, intravitreal administration of Müller glia-derived sEVs preserved retinal ganglion cell (RGC) survival and visual function while suppressing microglial activation. Cargo analysis revealed that miR-125b-5p and miR-16-5p are key miRNAs that target Cx3c1; MG-sEV treatment reduced retinal Cx3c1 and pro-inflammatory cytokines and modulated Cx3c1–Cx3cr1 signaling in microglia, demonstrating that specialized glia-derived sEVs can restrain neuroinflammation and degeneration *in vivo* [45].

Neural stem cells (NSCs) release sEVs that regulate the neurogenic niche, influencing endogenous NSCs, neurons, astrocytes, microglia, and vascular endothelial cells. Under denervation, NSC-sEVs show the upregulation of specific circular RNAs; circAcdb6 acts as a sponge for miR-320-5p, increasing oxysterol-binding protein-related protein 2 expression and promoting NSC differentiation, revealing an intrinsic NSC-sEV program that fosters repair [46].

Across models of ischemic stroke and demyelination, NSC-sEVs modulate neuroinflammation, promote neuronal and oligodendroglial differentiation, and support angiogenesis, with reduced immunogenicity and enhanced blood–brain barrier crossing compared with whole-cell transplantation [46].

Although most mechanistic work has focused on CNS-resident cells, peripheral sEVs can reach and influence the brain. Aging alters the composition of circulating sEVs, which then enter the CNS and shift glial gene expression toward activated states, whereas stem-cell-derived peripheral sEVs can deliver neuroprotective cargo, attenuating complement and NF- κ B activation in neurodegenerative models [3].

5. Circulating sEVs as Minimally Invasive Biomarkers in Major Neurodegenerative Diseases

Circulating small extracellular vesicles (sEVs) in blood offer a window into CNS pathology while avoiding invasive cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) collection. Original clinical and translational studies of Alzheimer's disease (AD), Parkinson's disease (PD), amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and frontotemporal dementia (FTD) support their potential for diagnosis, staging, and prognosis. A key advance is the simultaneous enrichment of multiple brain cell-derived sEV subtypes from plasma (neurons, astrocytes, microglia, oligodendrocytes, pericytes, and endothelial cells), followed by targeted miRNA analysis. In older adults with normal cognition, mild cognitive impairment (MCI), MCI converting to AD dementia (MCI-AD), and AD dementia, miRNAs in specific sEV subtypes were differentially expressed and distinguished dementia stages with an area under the curve (AUC) > 0.90. These miRNA signatures are also correlated with temporal cortical thickness on MRI, directly linking blood sEV signals to structural neurodegeneration [47].

Broader plasma EV studies have shown that small and large EV fractions carry distinct miRNA profiles that distinguish AD patients from healthy controls and from those with other neurodegenerative diseases. sEV-associated miRNAs converge on pathways including ubiquitin-mediated proteolysis and Toll-like receptor signaling, which is

consistent with AD-related protein homeostasis and innate immune activation [15].

Work on blood brain-derived EV enrichment protocols highlights the feasibility and challenges of CNS-specific biomarker capture. A systematic comparison of polymer-based and L1CAM immunoprecipitation-based enrichment in age-related neurodegenerative diseases revealed that most AD blood studies use ExoQuick for total EVs and L1CAM for presumed neuronal EVs, yet centrifugation and antibody protocols vary substantially, underscoring the need for harmonization to make AD sEV biomarkers clinically robust [48].

Plasma neural-derived sEVs carrying α -synuclein (α -syn) and DJ-1 are repeatedly elevated in PD patients. In a large case–control study, L1CAM-positive neuronal sEVs were isolated from the plasma of 267 PD patients and 214 controls; the neuronal sEV α -syn concentration was significantly greater in PD patients than in HCs and strongly correlated with clinical severity. A second study revealed that both α -syn and DJ-1 in plasma neural-derived sEVs were upregulated in early- and advanced-stage PD patients compared with controls, although these markers did not reliably differentiate early from late PD patients [49].

Crucially, circulating neuronal sEV α -syn can aid in differential diagnosis. In plasma from patients with PD and multiple system atrophy (MSA), neuronal sEV α -syn was approximately two-fold lower in MSA patients than in PD patients. By combining cohorts (735 participants total), investigators identified a neuronal sEV α -syn threshold of 14.0 ng/L that consistently differentiated PD from MSA, suggesting practical cut-offs for clinical use [49].

In addition to proteins, plasma-derived sEV miRNAs also show diagnostic potential. In a multi-disease study, miRNA profiles from small and large EVs discriminated PD patients from controls and from AD patients, ALS patients, and FTD patients, with disease-specific signatures hint at pathway-level differences [15].

The same plasma EV miRNA sequencing study demonstrated that both LEV and SEV fractions from ALS and FTD patients harbor distinct miRNA signatures compared with those of controls. Pathway analysis suggested that sEV-associated miRNAs are enriched for the ubiquitin-proteasome and Toll-like receptor pathways, whereas LEV-associated miRNAs are more closely linked to neurotrophin signaling and glycosphingolipid biosynthesis, implying that different circulating EV size classes may be involved in different aspects of ALS/FTD pathobiology [15]. These disease- and vesicle-specific patterns support the use of circulating sEV miRNA panels as multi-disease biomarker tools.

Blood-based brain EV biomarkers face two central technical issues: how to optimally enrich CNS-derived vesicles from a complex plasma background and how to standardize protocols between laboratories. A systematic assessment of brain-derived EV (BEV) enrichment for blood biomarkers across AD and other age-related neurodegenerative diseases revealed that 82% of studies use polymer-based EV precipitation and that 92% rely on L1CAM for neuronal EV immunocapture. Only 26.8% of the 82 proteins used for BEV enrichment or post-enrichment characterization were CNS-specific, emphasizing that better marker panels are needed to confirm the CNS origin [48].

Despite these challenges, accumulating evidence indicates that (i) detecting AD with high sensitivity/specificity via miRNAs in cell-specific sEVs; (ii) reflecting structural brain atrophy; (iii) distinguishing PD patients from controls and from MSAs via neuronal sEV α -syn and DJ-1 [49]; and (iv) providing disease-specific miRNA fingerprints across AD, PD, ALS, and FTD (Table 1) [15].

6. Therapeutic Targets of Pathogenic sEV Pathways in Neurodegeneration

Therapeutic strategies for treating neurodegeneration increasingly aim either to neutralize **pathogenic sEV signaling** or to exploit engineered sEVs as precision delivery systems to restore homeostatic pathways. Original experimental studies in Alzheimer's disease (AD), Parkinson's disease (PD), and related models highlight several concrete

Table 1
Circulating sEVs as Minimally Invasive Biomarkers in Major Neurodegenerative Diseases.

| Disease/condition | Biofluid & sEV type | Main sEV biomarker(s) measured | Key diagnostic/clinical finding | References |
|--|-------------------------------------|---|---|------------|
| Glaucoma (RGC degeneration) | Plasma-derived sEVs | miR-29 family in circulating sEVs | PDEV-miR-29 s upregulated in glaucoma; levels associate with visual field defects and protect RGCs in vivo | [50] |
| Parkinson's disease | Salivary sEVs | Total sEV concentration; sEV α -synuclein | Fluorescence-tagged salivary sEVs and sEV α -syn discriminated PD and prodromal PD from controls with ~94% sensitivity | [51] |
| Alzheimer's disease & MCI | Plasma-derived sEVs | A β 1-42, p-Tau, synaptophysin, IL-1 β , TNF- α , GFAP | Higher PsEV counts and A β 1-42/p-Tau in MCI/AD; synaptophysin \downarrow , inflammatory markers \uparrow ; high AUC for AD vs controls | [52] |
| AD, PD, ALS, FTD | Plasma LEVs & SEVs | Global mRNA cargo | Disease-specific and shared mRNA signatures in SEVs/LEVs; ALS/FTD SEVs enriched for mRNA-processing pathways | [53] |
| Parkinson's disease (older adults) | Serum sEVs | Mitochondrial proteins (ATP5A, NDUFS3, SDHB) & tetraspanins | PD showed more sEVs but reduced mitochondrial proteins; combined sEV and inflammatory profile classified PD vs controls | [54] |
| AD, PD, ALS, FTD | Plasma LEVs & SEVs | miRNA profiles (NGS) | Distinct miRNA signatures in LEVs and SEVs that discriminate each ND from controls; pathways linked to proteolysis and TLR signaling | [15] |
| Parkinson's disease | Plasma & plasma-sEVs | miR-23b-3p (plus 3 other miRNAs) | miR-23b-3p up in plasma but down in plasma-sEVs in PD; both matrices yield good ROC AUC vs age-matched controls | [55] |
| Parkinson's disease | Plasma EV subtypes (pure small EVs) | miR-34a-5p | miR-34a-5p significantly upregulated in pure small EVs from PD; AUC \approx 0.74 and correlates with disease duration and severity | [56] |
| Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis | Serum sEVs | miR-23c, miR-192-5p | Distinct sEV miRNA profile in ALS; up-regulation of miR-23c and down-regulation of miR-192-5p validated as potential biomarkers | [57] |
| Dementia with Lewy bodies | Serum sEVs | Total RNA (mRNA, miRNA, others) | 846 DE RNAs (incl. 30 miRNAs); serum sEV RNAs mirror brain changes, implicating UPS, DNA repair, RNA modification pathways | [58] |
| ALS, FTD, PSP, bvFTD | Plasma EVs (small-EV enriched) | TDP-43; 3R/4R tau isoform ratio | EV TDP-43 and 3R/4R tau ratios distinguish ALS, tauopathies, and FTD with AUC > 0.9; correlate with neurodegeneration and severity | [59] |
| Early Alzheimer's disease | Plasma neuron-derived EVs | p181-Tau, A β 42, BDNF/proBDNF, GluR2, PSD95, GAP43, syntaxin-1 | NDEVs show elevated p181-Tau/A β 42 and reduced synaptic proteins; multianalyte model correctly classifies most AD vs controls | [60] |
| Glioblastoma (brain tumor) | Serum sEVs | circSMARCA5, circHIPK3 (circRNAs) | Both circRNAs reduced in GBM-sEVs; each achieves AUC \approx 0.82-0.86; combination with blood ratios improves diagnostic accuracy | [61] |
| Brain tumors (GBM, metastases, meningioma) | Serum sEVs | MMP-9 protein | sEV-MMP-9 reflects tumor aggressiveness; low sEV-MMP-9 (<28 ppm) associates with ~8-month survival advantage in GBM | [62] |
| Traumatic brain injury | Plasma brain-specific sEVs | CCL2 on ATP1B2/EAAT2-positive sEVs | Brain-specific sEV-CCL2 markedly increased in TBI; single-sEV SERS platform reaches near-perfect AUC for TBI vs controls | [63] |

approaches. In toxin-based PD models, enteric neurons exposed to rotenone release α -synuclein-loaded sEVs that traffic along the vagus nerve to brainstem nuclei, providing a mechanistic route for pathology propagation. Surgical vagotomy or pharmacologic blockade of sEV tetraspanins markedly reduces the central accumulation of α -synuclein, directly indicating that interfering with vesicle-mediated transport can attenuate prion-like spread in vivo [1]. In LRRK2-G2019S PD mutation carriers, phosphorylated Rab12 (pSer106-Rab12) is elevated in urinary and plasma sEVs and rapidly decreases after one week of treatment with the LRRK2 inhibitor MLI-2, demonstrating that targeting a kinase upstream of sEV-associated trafficking proteins can both modify vesicle signaling and provide real-time pharmacodynamic read-outs [1]. This illustrates a second mode of targeting: inhibiting regulators of vesicle biogenesis/trafficking rather than the vesicles themselves.

Human Wharton's jelly mesenchymal stem cell (MSC)-derived sEVs have been tested in an in vitro AD model using hippocampal cells from 5xFAD transgenic mice. After addition to cultures, these sEVs were non-toxic, efficiently internalized by neurons and astrocytes, reduced extracellular A β peptide levels, and increased synaptic density [64]. These data suggest that MSC-sEVs can acutely shift amyloid handling and synaptic integrity toward a less pathogenic state.

In vascular dementia-relevant models, stromal or mesenchymal cell-derived sEVs attenuate microglial-driven neuroinflammation by inhibiting TLR2/IRAK1/NF- κ B signaling and increasing the M2/M1 microglial ratio. Hypoxia-preconditioned MSC-sEVs enriched with miR-216a-5p downregulated the TLR4/NF- κ B/PI3K/AKT pathway, further facilitating M2 polarization. Adipose stem cell-derived sEVs carrying miR-188-3p inhibited CDK5-dependent autophagy and NLRP3-mediated inflammasome activation, conferring neuroprotection in preclinical models [65]. Collectively, these interventions **reprogram innate immune and cell-death pathways** through vesicle-delivered miRNAs.

A direct demonstration of therapeutic sEV engineering involves delivery of the ROCK inhibitor SR3677 in a PD mouse model. Macrophage-derived sEVs were loaded with SR3677 and administered intranasally to

Parkin Q311X(A) mice. Compared with free SR3677, sEV-SR3677 increased the expression of mitophagy- and mitochondrial function-related genes, decreased ROCK2 expression, reduced inflammatory factor levels, and elevated brain dopamine levels more effectively. Sham EVs had modest benefits, indicating that both the pharmacologic cargo and the vesicle scaffold contributed. Ex vivo assays revealed improved mitochondrial respiration in glial cultures treated with sEV-SR3677, which was consistent with the restoration of defective mitophagy and energy metabolism [66].

7. Engineered sEVs and stem cell-derived sEVs as neuroprotective drug delivery systems)

Stem cell-derived small extracellular vesicles (sEVs) are being actively tested as **neuroprotective nanocarriers** that can cross the blood-brain barrier (BBB), modulate neuroinflammation, and deliver drugs or endogenous protective cargo in models of major neurodegenerative diseases. This original experimental work in Alzheimer's disease (AD), Parkinson's disease (PD), and neuroinflammation models illustrates both native and engineered sEV strategies. Small EVs from human Wharton's jelly mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs) were applied to hippocampal cultures derived from 5xFAD transgenic mice, an AD model carrying five familial AD mutations. These MSC-sEVs, which were isolated by asymmetric depth filtration, were non-toxic, were internalized by neurons and astrocytes, reduced the amount of extracellular A β peptide, and significantly increased the synaptic density in vitro [64]. These findings demonstrate that unmodified MSC-sEVs can restore synaptic marker expression and amyloid homeostasis, supporting their use as cell-free neuroprotective agents in AD.

In vivo, intranasal administration of sEVs from cytokine-preconditioned MSCs to 3xTg AD mice resulted in clear immunomodulatory and structural benefits. MSC-EVs reach the brain, dampen microglial activation, and increase dendritic spine density in hippocampal regions. Primary microglia treated with these EVs in vitro shift

toward an anti-inflammatory phenotype, indicating that microglial polarization is a key mechanism underlying *in vivo* neuroprotection [67]. Crucially, intranasal delivery offered a noninvasive route while still achieving central effects, underscoring the feasibility of repeated clinical dosing.-.

Neural stem cell-derived EVs (NSC-EVs) also show intrinsic neuroprotective properties. In two *in vitro* PD models, NSC-EVs significantly enhanced dopaminergic neuron survival and reduced apoptosis. These vesicles are naturally enriched in catalase, a strong antioxidant enzyme, which enables them to mitigate oxidative stress-mediated injury [68]. This work illustrates how the endogenous antioxidant cargo in stem cell-derived EVs can be leveraged without additional engineering.

In a preclinical AD mouse model, EVs from induced neural stem cells (iNSCs) derived from fibroblasts (iNSC-EVs) mitigated AD-like phenotypes, including deficits in learning and memory, suggesting that NSC-lineage EVs can reverse cognitive impairments and may be scalable via somatic cell reprogramming. [69]

In addition to their use as native cargo, stem cell-derived EVs have been used as vehicles for the delivery of small-molecule drugs against neuroinflammation. Human plasma-derived EVs (pEVs) and adipose-derived MSC-EVs (ADMSC-EVs) were loaded exogenously with donepezil (DNZ), a cholinesterase inhibitor with additional neuroprotective effects, to treat LPS-induced neuroinflammation. Both pEV-DNZ and ADMSC-EV-DNZ retain their nanoscale size (50–300 nm) and negative surface charge and display rapid, non-toxic uptake by human microglial HMC3 cells and BBB penetration in zebrafish [70].

In vitro, ADMSC-EVs alone significantly reduced inflammatory mediator release by HMC3 microglia, whereas DNZ-loaded pEVs and ADMSC-EVs decreased phagocytic activity and reactive oxygen species (ROS) levels. In zebrafish larvae, both formulations decreased microglial proliferation and exhibited antioxidant effects [70]. These data show that combining an intrinsically immunomodulatory carrier (ADMSC-EVs) with a neuroprotective drug (DNZ) can produce additive anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects *in vivo*, highlighting engineered EVs as versatile CNS drug platforms.

Engineered EVs have also been explored for kinase inhibitor delivery in PD-related models, where macrophage-derived EVs loaded with a ROCK inhibitor improved mitochondrial function and dopaminergic signaling more effectively than free drugs did, illustrating how EV encapsulation can enhance CNS bioavailability and pathway modulation [68]. Although this work did not use stem cell sources, it provides a template for similar engineering of MSC- or NSC-EVs.

Across these studies, several mechanistic themes have emerged. First, BBB penetration and brain targeting have been consistently demonstrated: MSC- and ADMSC-derived EVs successfully crossed the BBB in zebrafish and reached the brain following intranasal administration in mice, supporting their feasibility as systemic or mucosal delivery vehicles. Second, microglial and astroglial reprogramming appears to be a shared mechanism, as MSC-EV- and ADMSC-EV-based formulations reliably attenuated pro-inflammatory microglial activation while promoting more reparative glial phenotypes, an effect central to their neuroprotective actions in AD and neuroinflammation models [67,70]. Third, synaptic and neuronal preservation is a recurring outcome: in 5xFAD cultures and 3xTg mice, stem cell-derived sEVs restored synaptic density and protected neurons from A β - and inflammation-induced toxicity, resulting in improved network integrity and, *in vivo*, enhanced cognitive performance [64,67,69]. Fourth, the studies highlight distinctions between endogenous and exogenous cargo: NSC-derived EVs enriched with catalase exert potent antioxidant effects without engineering [68], whereas DNZ-loaded ADMSC-derived EVs illustrate how classical drugs can be repurposed with improved delivery efficiency and synergize with intrinsic EV bioactivity [70]. Preclinical evidence indicates that both native and engineered stem cell-derived sEVs act as promising, minimally immunogenic neuroprotective drug-delivery systems capable of crossing the BBB, modulating neuro-inflammatory pathways, and preserving neuronal and synaptic function

across models of AD, PD, and neuroinflammation (Table 2).

8. Future directions and conclusions

Translating small extracellular vesicle (sEV) research into clinically useful biomarkers and therapeutics for neurodegenerative diseases (NDDs) will require coordinated advances in technology, trial design, and regulatory frameworks. Current evidence indicates that sEVs can both propagate pathology and serve as highly informative reporters of the cell state and drug-target engagement, positioning them uniquely at the interface of diagnosis and intervention [1,11,80–82].

Future biomarker development must progress beyond discovery toward rigorous clinical qualification. Although numerous EV and sEV signatures have been reported for Alzheimer's disease (AD), Parkinson's disease (PD), amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and other NDDs, most remain insufficiently validated in large, diverse cohorts [82]. The key priorities include the following. First, standardized pre-analytical and analytical pipelines are essential, as heterogeneity in isolation methods (ultracentrifugation, precipitation, size exclusion, immunocapture), quantification, and normalization continues to undermine reproducibility [83–85]. Alignment with ISEV/MISEV-style minimal information standards, including reporting of yield, purity, and cell-of-origin markers, is critical. Second, high-throughput and *in situ* platforms are needed to overcome the labor-intensive nature of current isolation workflows; microfluidic, acoustic and immunosensor technologies that reduce or bypass bulk isolation will be central for clinical scalability. Third, multi-analyte, multi-omics panels are needed, as single markers are unlikely to capture NDD complexity. Integrating sEV proteins, lipids, and miRNAs with imaging and fluid biomarkers may increase the sensitivity for prodromal disease and enable more precise staging. Fourth, CNS-enriched vesicle capture through refined immunoaffinity approaches for neuron-, astrocyte-, and microglia-derived sEVs will improve disease specificity, particularly when peripheral EV noise from comorbid systemic conditions is high [86,87]. Finally, prospective, interventional studies are needed to elevate sEV readout from prognostic associations to regulatory-grade biomarkers; this will involve evaluating sEV measures as pharmacodynamic and surrogate end points in therapeutic trials, with rigorous comparison to established clinical and imaging standards. AI-driven analytics and single-vesicle profiling will likely be central for extracting robust signatures from high-dimensional sEV datasets and harmonizing measurements across centers [88].

On the therapeutic side, both the role of endogenous disease-modifying and exogenously engineered sEVs are under active investigation. Preclinical studies support sEVs and mesenchymal stem cell-derived EVs (MSC-EVs) as carriers of neuroprotective cargo and modulators of neuroinflammation, synaptic plasticity, and angiogenesis. A translational roadmap must address several domains. First, source selection and product definition require comparative studies of MSC-derived EVs, other stem-cell-derived EVs, and engineered donor cells to identify optimal sources for specific indications and to link cargo profiles to mechanisms of action [3,6,10]. Second, manufacturing at scale under GMP demands robust, scalable bioprocesses that ensure batch-to-batch consistency, with clearly defined critical quality attributes such as size distribution, potency assays, cargo identity, sterility, and stability aligned with regulatory expectations for biologicals and advanced therapies. Third, load engineering and targeting must balance improved loading of siRNAs, gene-editing tools, or small molecules (via parental-cell engineering or exogenous methods) with preservation of vesicle integrity and safety while optimizing surface engineering for CNS- and lesion-specific targeting. Fourth, safety, dosing and immunogenicity remain incompletely characterized; long-term bio-distribution, off-target uptake and cumulative immune consequences of repeated systemic or intrathecal dosing require standardized toxicology and immunogenicity frameworks across NDD indications. Fifth, rational trial design and patient stratification should incorporate sEV biomarkers as companion diagnostics and pharmacodynamic readouts in early-

Table 2
Therapeutically Targeting Pathogenic sEV Pathways in Neurodegeneration.

| Disease/model | Therapeutic sEV strategy (target/pathway) | Main mechanistic effect on pathogenic sEV pathway | Key therapeutic outcome in vivo | References |
|---|---|--|---|------------|
| Sporadic Alzheimer's disease (STZ mouse) | iPSC-MSC-sEVs enriched in miR-223-3p targeting NLRP3/GSDMD inflammasome | sEV-miR-223-3p directly suppresses NLRP3, reducing pyroptosis-related neuroinflammation | ↓ amyloid deposition, ↓ neuronal apoptosis, improved cognition | [71] |
| Optic nerve crush (RGC degeneration) | Müller glia-sEVs carrying miR-125b-5p/miR-16-5p targeting Cx3c1–Cx3cr1 | Downregulation of Cx3c1 dampens microglial activation and inflammatory signaling | Preserved RGCs and visual function after injury | [45] |
| Traumatic spinal cord injury | Neural stem cell-sEVs activating autophagy | Induce LC3B/beclin-1, promoting autophagy and limiting apoptosis and inflammation | Reduced lesion size, improved locomotion, less neuroinflammation | [72] |
| Spinal cord injury | M2 BMDM-sEVs enriched in miR-421-3p targeting mTOR/autophagy | miR-421-3p inhibits mTOR, enhancing neuronal autophagy and survival | Better functional recovery, reduced neuronal apoptosis | [73] |
| Parkinson's disease (MPTP rat) | DPSC-sEVs as carrier for phloroglucinol (antioxidant) | sEV-encapsulation overcomes BBB limits, delivering antioxidant and anti-inflammatory cargo | Improved motor/non-motor deficits, ↑ TH neurons, ↓ TNF-α | [74] |
| Parkinson's disease | Inhibition of EV-tRF-02514 to restore ATG5/autophagy in microglia | Blocking tRF-02514 in PD-EVs rescues ATG5, increasing autophagy and reducing pyroptosis | Protected dopaminergic neurons, improved behavior, ↓ inflammatory factors | [34] |
| Parkinson's disease (Parkin mutant) | Macrophage-sEVs loaded with ROCK2 inhibitor SR3677 (mitophagy) | sEV-SR3677 enhances mitophagy gene expression and mitochondrial respiration | ↑ brain dopamine, improved mitochondrial function vs free drug | [66] |
| ALS (SOD1G93A mice) | Intranasal MSC-sEVs modulating NF-κB & complement–coagulation | sEVs dampen NF-κB and complement cascade overactivation in spinal cord | Delayed disease progression, better motor function, prolonged survival | [41] |
| ALS (SOD1G93A) | In vivo self-assembled sEV-encapsulated SOD1-siRNA (RVG-tagged) | Liver-reprogrammed sEVs deliver SOD1-siRNA to CNS, silencing mutant SOD1 | Ameliorated weight loss, motor decline, neuroinflammation, NMJ degeneration | [75] |
| Acute spinal cord injury (rat, monkey) | MSC-sEVs overexpressing BDNF (BDNF-sEVs) | Combines intrinsic sEV anti-inflammatory cargo with BDNF/TrkB activation | Reduced glial activation, ↑ axon rewiring and function in rats and monkeys | [76] |
| Cerebral ischemia (stroke mouse) | Intranasal BDNF-loaded MSC-sEVs | sEV-BDNF activates BDNF/TrkB and delivers neuroprotective miRNAs/proteins | Smaller infarcts, ↑ neurogenesis/angiogenesis, ↓ inflammatory cytokines | [77] |
| Diabetic peripheral neuropathy (neuroinflammatory neuropathy) | NSC-EVs loaded with sinomenine targeting WNT5a/TRPV1 | Aptamer-targeted EVs shift microglia M1 → M2, suppress WNT5a/TRPV1 signaling | Improved neuropathic pain and nerve pathology in DPN mice | [78] |
| EAE/ALS models | IFN-γ-primed MSC-sEV miRNAs (miR-467f/466q) modulating p38 MAPK | sEV-miRNAs downregulate Map3k8/Mk2, reducing microglial pro-inflammatory phenotype | Lower spinal neuroinflammation markers in EAE mice | [32] |
| Acute brain injury (IL-1β striatal injection) | nSMase2 inhibitor PDDC to block EV biogenesis | Pharmacologic nSMase2 inhibition reduces neuron/oligodendrocyte/microglia EV release | Normalized EV levels; supports EV-biogenesis inhibition as neuroprotective strategy | [79] |
| Alzheimer's disease (5xFAD mice) | Targeting acid sphingomyelinase (ASM) to alter Aβ-EV interactions | ASM inhibitors disrupt Aβ–ceramide–EV complexes, reducing Aβ-laden, neurotoxic sEVs | Decreased EV-mediated neurotoxicity; ASM highlighted as AD EV target | [26] |

phase trials, enabling dose selection, responder enrichment, and mechanism-based go/no-go decisions [2,4,89–91].

A practical roadmap for the clinical translation of sEV-based biomarkers and therapeutics in NDDs can be conceptualized across three intertwined tracks. The first is discovery and mechanistic anchoring, encompassing in vitro and animal models and deep molecular profiling of disease-associated and therapeutic sEVs. The second is translational optimization, including standardized platforms, scalable GMP manufacturing, validated potency and biomarker assays, and early human proof-of-concept studies. The third is regulatory and health-system integration, involving alignment with the FDA/EMA and ISEV guidelines, cost-effectiveness analyses, and incorporation into precision-medicine care pathways. sEV-based approaches are poised to reshape the diagnostic and therapeutic landscape of neurodegenerative diseases by coupling minimally invasive, CNS-informative biomarkers with targeted nanotherapeutics capable of traversing the blood–brain barrier. Realizing this potential will depend less on resolving fundamental biology, which already strongly supports their relevance, than on solving practical challenges of standardization, scalability, safety, and regulatory acceptance through coordinated, multidisciplinary efforts.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Askarova Zebo Zafarjonovna: Writing – original draft, Project

administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Elmuratova Aysulu:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation. **Sanoeva Matlyuba:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Hamroyev Rashid:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Jurakulov Bakhrom Azamatovich:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Ahmadjonov Ahmadjon:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Amirullayeva Barno:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Azimova Mayram Kurbanovna:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Mahsudali Rohataliyev Mahmudali ugli:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Iskandarova Shaxodat:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Turakulov Rustam:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Matrizaeva Gulnara Jumaniyazovna:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation. **Alisher Ishankulov:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

None.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

References

- M. Ghosh, A.-H. Bayat, D.D. Pearce, Small extracellular vesicles in neurodegenerative disease: emerging roles in pathogenesis, biomarker discovery, and therapy, *Int. J. Mol. Sci.* 26 (15) (2025) 7246.
- X. Xia, Y. Wang, J.C. Zheng, Extracellular vesicles, from the pathogenesis to the therapy of neurodegenerative diseases, *Translational neurodegeneration* 11 (1) (2022) 53.
- W.Q. Lim, et al., Small extracellular vesicles' miRNAs: biomarkers and therapeutics for neurodegenerative diseases, *Pharmaceutics* 15 (4) (2023) 1216.
- N. Hu, et al., Advancements in extracellular vesicle therapy for neurodegenerative diseases, *Explor. Neuroprot. Ther.* 5 (2025) 1004104.
- H.A. Rather, et al., Therapeutic efficacy and promise of stem cell-derived extracellular vesicles in Alzheimer's disease and other aging-related disorders, *Ageing Res. Rev.* 92 (2023) 102088.
- H. Shen, et al., Research progress of extracellular vesicles derived from mesenchymal stem cells in the treatment of neurodegenerative diseases, *Front. Immunol.* 16 (2025) 1496304.
- M.C. Ciferri, R. Quarto, R. Tasso, Extracellular vesicles as biomarkers and therapeutic tools: from pre-clinical to clinical applications, *Biology* 10 (5) (2021) 359.
- M. Vaz, T. Soares Martins, A.G. Henriques, Extracellular vesicles in the study of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases: methodologies applied from cells to biofluids, *J. Neurochem.* 163 (4) (2022) 266–309.
- L. Pulliam, et al., Plasma neuronal exosomes serve as biomarkers of cognitive impairment in HIV infection and Alzheimer's disease, *J. Neurovirol.* 25 (5) (2019) 702–709.
- P. Chen, et al., Mesenchymal stem cell-derived extracellular vesicles: emerging therapies for neurodegenerative diseases, *Int. J. Nanomedicine* (2025) 8547–8565.
- N. Vassileff, L. Cheng, A.F. Hill, Extracellular vesicles—propagators of neuropathology and sources of potential biomarkers and therapeutics for neurodegenerative diseases, *J. Cell Sci.* 133 (23) (2020) jcs243139.
- A. Sulek, Secretome—the role of extracellular vesicles in the pathogenesis and therapy of neurodegenerative diseases, *Adv. Psychiatry Neurol./Postępy Psychiatr. Neurol.* 33 (1) (2024).
- A. Onkar, et al., Smart nanoscale extracellular vesicles in the brain: unveiling their biology, diagnostic potential, and therapeutic applications, *ACS Appl. Mater. Interfaces* 16 (6) (2024) 6709–6742.
- R. Upadhyaya, et al., Astrocyte-derived extracellular vesicles: Neuroreparative properties and role in the pathogenesis of neurodegenerative disorders, *J. Control. Release* 323 (2020) 225–239.
- D. Sproviero, et al., Different miRNA profiles in plasma derived small and large extracellular vesicles from patients with neurodegenerative diseases, *Int. J. Mol. Sci.* 22 (5) (2021) 2737.
- A.F. Hill, Extracellular vesicles and neurodegenerative diseases, *J. Neurosci.* 39 (47) (2019) 9269–9273.
- C. Quek, A.F. Hill, The role of extracellular vesicles in neurodegenerative diseases, *Biochem. Biophys. Res. Commun.* 483 (4) (2017) 1178–1186.
- Y. Zhu, et al., Research progress on astrocyte-derived extracellular vesicles in the pathogenesis and treatment of neurodegenerative diseases, *Rev. Neurosci.* 35 (8) (2024) 855–875.
- S. Zhang, et al., Brain-derived extracellular vesicles: a promising avenue for Parkinson's disease pathogenesis, diagnosis, and treatment, *Neural Regen. Res.* 21 (4) (2026) 1447–1467.
- N.A. Khan, et al., The evolving role of extracellular vesicles (exosomes) as biomarkers in traumatic brain injury: clinical perspectives and therapeutic implications, *Front. Aging Neurosci.* 14 (2022) 933434.
- A.S. Cone, et al., Mesenchymal stem cell-derived extracellular vesicles ameliorate Alzheimer's disease-like phenotypes in a preclinical mouse model, *Theranostics* 11 (17) (2021) 8129.
- V. Bodart-Santos, et al., Alzheimer's disease brain-derived extracellular vesicles reveal altered synapse-related proteome and induce cognitive impairment in mice, *Alzheimers Dement.* 19 (12) (2023) 5418–5436.
- S. Muraoka, et al., Enrichment of neurodegenerative microglia signature in brain-derived extracellular vesicles isolated from Alzheimer's disease mouse models, *J. Proteome Res.* 20 (3) (2021) 1733–1743.
- D.T. Chemparathy, et al., Neuropathogenic role of astrocyte-derived extracellular vesicles in HIV-associated neurocognitive disorders, *J. Extracell. Vesicles* 13 (4) (2024) e12439.
- N.Z. Khan, et al., Spinal cord injury alters microRNA and CD81+ exosome levels in plasma extracellular nanoparticles with neuroinflammatory potential, *Brain Behav. Immun.* 92 (2021) 165–183.
- A. Elsherbini, et al., Novel isolation method reveals sex-specific composition and neurotoxicity of small extracellular vesicles in a mouse model of Alzheimer's disease, *Cells* 12 (12) (2023) 1623.
- L.A. Apodaca, et al., Human neural stem cell-derived extracellular vesicles mitigate hallmarks of Alzheimer's disease, *Alzheimer's Res. Ther.* 13 (1) (2021) 57.
- R. Jean-Toussaint, et al., Proteome characterization of small extracellular vesicles from spared nerve injury model of neuropathic pain, *J. Proteomics* 211 (2020) 103540.
- C. Gómez-Molina, et al., Small extracellular vesicles in rat serum contain astrocyte-derived protein biomarkers of repetitive stress, *Int. J. Neuropsychopharmacol.* 22 (3) (2019) 232–246.
- B. Aulston, et al., Extracellular vesicles isolated from familial Alzheimer's disease neuronal cultures induce aberrant tau phosphorylation in the wild-type mouse brain, *J. Alzheimer's Dis* 72 (2) (2019) 575–585.
- S. Herman, et al., CSF-derived extracellular vesicles from patients with Parkinson's disease induce symptoms and pathology, *Brain* 146 (1) (2023) 209–224.
- D. Giunti, et al., Role of miRNAs shuttled by mesenchymal stem cell-derived small extracellular vesicles in modulating neuroinflammation, *Sci. Rep.* 11 (1) (2021) 1740.
- S. Mao, et al., Extracellular vesicles enriched with miR-486 from Tetramethylpyrazine-preconditioned bone marrow mesenchymal stem cells promote microglia/macrophage M2 polarization and enhance neurogenesis in rats with ischemic stroke, *Stem Cell Res Ther* 16 (1) (2025) 455.
- X. Dong, et al., Inhibition of tRF-02514 in extracellular vesicles preserves microglia pyroptosis and protects against Parkinson's disease, *Mol. Neurobiol.* (2025) 1–17.
- B. Li, et al., Impact of neural stem cell-derived extracellular vesicles on mitochondrial dysfunction, sirtuin 1 level, and synaptic deficits in Alzheimer's disease, *J. Neurochem.* 154 (5) (2020) 502–518.
- D.S. Harischandra, et al., Manganese promotes the aggregation and prion-like cell-to-cell exosomal transmission of α -synuclein, *Sci. Signal.* 12 (572) (2019) eaau4543.
- M. Tyagi, R. Chadha, E. de Hoog, K.R. Sullivan, A.C. Walker, A. Northrop, B. Fabian, M. Fuxreiter, B.T. Hyman, J.D. Shepherd, Arc mediates intercellular tau transmission via extracellular vesicles, *bioRxiv* 22 (2024 Oct).
- D.M. Morales-Prieto, et al., Small extracellular vesicles from peripheral blood of aged mice pass the blood-brain barrier and induce glial cell activation, *Cells* 11 (4) (2022) 625.
- T. Zheng, et al., Plasma exosomes spread and cluster around β -amyloid plaques in an animal model of Alzheimer's disease, *Front. Aging Neurosci.* 9 (2017) 12.
- S. Salvany, et al., Accumulation of misfolded SOD1 outlines distinct patterns of motor neuron pathology and death during disease progression in a SOD1G93A mouse model of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, *Brain Pathol.* 32 (6) (2022) e13078.
- J. Zhou, et al., Intranasal delivery of small extracellular vesicles reduces the progress of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis and the overactivation of complement-coagulation cascade and NF- κ B signaling in SOD1 G93A mice, *J. Nanobiotechnol.* 22 (1) (2024) 503.
- Y. You, et al., Human neural cell type-specific extracellular vesicle proteome defines disease-related molecules associated with activated astrocytes in Alzheimer's disease brain, *J. Extracell. Vesicles* 11 (1) (2022) e12183.
- L.S. Ransom, et al., Human brain small extracellular vesicles contain selectively packaged, full-length mRNA, *Cell Rep.* 43 (4) (2024).
- M. Ghosh, D.D. Pearce, The Yin and Yang of microglia-derived extracellular vesicles in CNS injury and diseases, *Cells* 13 (22) (2024) 1834.
- H.D. Qian, et al., Müller glial-derived small extracellular vesicles mitigate RGC degeneration by suppressing microglial activation via Cx3cl1-Cx3cr1 signaling, *Adv. Healthc. Mater.* 14 (12) (2025) 2404306.
- M. Wang, et al., Neural stem cell-derived small extracellular vesicles: a new therapy approach in neurological diseases, *Front. Immunol.* 16 (2025) 1548206.
- A. Kumar, et al., MicroRNA expression in extracellular vesicles as a novel blood-based biomarker for Alzheimer's disease, *Alzheimers Dement.* 19 (11) (2023) 4952–4966.
- A. Badhwar, et al., Assessment of brain-derived extracellular vesicle enrichment for blood biomarker analysis in age-related neurodegenerative diseases: an international overview, *Alzheimers Dement.* 20 (7) (2024) 4411–4422.
- S. Al Abdullah, I. Cocklereece, K. Dellinger, Unlocking the potential of circulating small extracellular vesicles in neurodegenerative disease through targeted biomarkers and advancements in biosensing, *Exploration of BioMat-X* 1 (2) (2024) 100–123.
- T. Li, et al., Circulating small extracellular vesicles involved in systemic regulation respond to RGC degeneration in glaucoma, *Adv. Sci.* 11 (32) (2024) 2309307.
- S. Rastogi, et al., Fluorescence-tagged salivary small extracellular vesicles as a nanotool in early diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, *BMC Med.* 21 (1) (2023) 335.
- R. Singh, et al., Circulating small extracellular vesicles in Alzheimer's disease: a case-control study of neuro-inflammation and synaptic dysfunction, *BMC Med.* 22 (1) (2024) 254.
- D. Sproviero, et al., Extracellular vesicles derived from plasma of patients with neurodegenerative disease have common transcriptomic profiling, *Front. Aging Neurosci.* 14 (2022) 785741.
- A. Picca, et al., Mitochondrial signatures in circulating extracellular vesicles of older adults with Parkinson's disease: results from the EXosomes in Parkinson's disease (EXPAND) study, *J. Clin. Med.* 9 (2) (2020) 504.
- S. Rai, et al., Circulating plasma miR-23b-3p as a biomarker target for idiopathic Parkinson's disease: comparison with small extracellular vesicle miRNA, *Front. Neurosci.* 17 (2023) 1174951.
- I. Grossi, et al., MicroRNA-34a-5p expression in the plasma and in its extracellular vesicle fractions in subjects with Parkinson's disease: an exploratory study, *Int. J. Mol. Med.* 47 (2) (2021) 533–546.

- [57] J.-A. Kim, et al., Small RNA sequencing of circulating small extracellular vesicles microRNAs in patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, *Sci. Rep.* 13 (1) (2023) 5528.
- [58] A.P. Rajkumar, et al., Next-generation RNA-sequencing of serum small extracellular vesicles discovers potential diagnostic biomarkers for dementia with Lewy bodies, *Am. J. Geriatr. Psychiatry* 29 (6) (2021) 573–584.
- [59] M. Chatterjee, et al., Plasma extracellular vesicle tau and TDP-43 as diagnostic biomarkers in FTD and ALS, *Nat. Med.* 30 (6) (2024) 1771–1783.
- [60] E. Eitan, et al., Synaptic proteins in neuron-derived extracellular vesicles as biomarkers for Alzheimer's disease: novel methodology and clinical proof of concept, *Extracellular Vesicles and Circulating Nucleic Acids* 4 (1) (2023) 133.
- [61] M. Stella, et al., Serum extracellular vesicle-derived circHIPK3 and circSMARCA5 are two novel diagnostic biomarkers for glioblastoma multiforme, *Pharmaceuticals* 14 (7) (2021) 618.
- [62] G. Dobra, et al., MMP-9 as prognostic marker for brain tumours: a comparative study on serum-derived small extracellular vesicles, *Cancers* 15 (3) (2023) 712.
- [63] Z. Zhang, R.J. Lobb, R.E. Lane, X.V. To, X. Niu, F. Antaw, G. Pietrogrande, C. Winter, A. Wuethrich, F. Nasrallah, M. Trau, Single Extracellular Vesicle Profiling to Define Brain Specific Traumatic Brain Injury Induced Neuro-Inflammation, *Small Methods* 9 (7) (2025 Jul) 2401931.
- [64] D.Y. Zhdanova, et al., Effect of small extracellular vesicles produced by mesenchymal stem cells on 5xFAD mice hippocampal cultures, *Int. J. Mol. Sci.* 26 (9) (2025) 4026.
- [65] Y. Yang, et al., Therapeutic approaches and potential mechanisms of small extracellular vesicles in treating vascular dementia, *Cells* 14 (6) (2025) 409.
- [66] C. Carbajal, et al., Therapeutic efficacy of small extracellular vesicles loaded with ROCK inhibitor in Parkinson's disease, *Pharmaceutics* 17 (3) (2025) 365.
- [67] M. Losurdo, et al., Intranasal delivery of mesenchymal stem cell-derived extracellular vesicles exerts immunomodulatory and neuroprotective effects in a 3xTg model of Alzheimer's disease, *Stem Cells Transl. Med.* 9 (9) (2020) 1068–1084.
- [68] M. Díaz Reyes, et al., Neuroprotective effect of NSCs-derived extracellular vesicles in Parkinson's disease models, *Sci. Rep.* 15 (1) (2025) 6092.
- [69] G. Gao, et al., Neural stem cell-derived extracellular vesicles mitigate Alzheimer's disease-like phenotypes in a preclinical mouse model, *Signal Transduct. Target. Ther.* 8 (1) (2023) 228.
- [70] R.O. Silva, et al., Exploring the potential of plasma and adipose mesenchymal stem cell-derived extracellular vesicles as novel platforms for neuroinflammation therapy, *J. Control. Release* 377 (2025) 880–898.
- [71] L. Lin, et al., MSC-derived extracellular vesicles alleviate NLRP3/GSDMD-mediated neuroinflammation in mouse model of sporadic Alzheimer's disease, *Mol. Neurobiol.* 61 (8) (2024) 5494–5509.
- [72] Y. Rong, et al., Neural stem cell-derived small extracellular vesicles attenuate apoptosis and neuroinflammation after traumatic spinal cord injury by activating autophagy, *Cell Death Dis.* 10 (5) (2019) 340.
- [73] J. Wang, et al., MicroRNA-421-3p-abundant small extracellular vesicles derived from M2 bone marrow-derived macrophages attenuate apoptosis and promote motor function recovery via inhibition of mTOR in spinal cord injury, *J. Nanobiotechnol.* 18 (1) (2020) 72.
- [74] K. Mondal, et al., Intranasal delivery of DPSC-derived small extracellular vesicles-encased phloroglucinol attenuates non-motor and motor deficits and promotes neurogenesis in an in vivo rat model of Parkinson's disease, *Stem Cell Res. Ther.* 16 (1) (2025) 570.
- [75] J. Guo, Q. Zou, J. Xu, J. Lei, X. Yin, B. Li, J. Fu, J. Mi, Y. Wang, H. Huang, C. Y. Zhang, In vivo self-assembled SOD1-siRNAs mitigate muscle atrophy and denervation in amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, *Brain* 8 (2025 Aug) awaf291.
- [76] Z. Huang, et al., Intranasal delivery of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF)-loaded small extracellular vesicles for treating acute spinal cord injury in rats and monkeys, *J. Extracell. Vesicles* 14 (4) (2025) e70066.
- [77] X. Zhou, et al., Intranasal delivery of BDNF-loaded small extracellular vesicles for cerebral ischemia therapy, *J. Control. Release* 357 (2023) 1–19.
- [78] J. Chen, et al., Targeted neural stem cell-derived extracellular vesicles loaded with Sinomenine alleviate diabetic peripheral neuropathy via WNT5a/TRPV1 pathway modulation, *J. Nanobiotechnol.* 23 (1) (2025) 588.
- [79] C. Tallon, et al., Inhibition of neutral sphingomyelinase 2 reduces extracellular vesicle release from neurons, oligodendrocytes, and activated microglial cells following acute brain injury, *Biochem. Pharmacol.* 194 (2021) 114796.
- [80] A.G. Thompson, et al., Extracellular vesicles in neurodegenerative disease—pathogenesis to biomarkers, *Nat. Rev. Neurol.* 12 (6) (2016) 346–357.
- [81] A. Raghav, et al., Extracellular vesicles in neurodegenerative diseases: a systematic review, *Front. Mol. Neurosci.* 15 (2022) 1061076.
- [82] Z. Li, et al., Research progress on the role of extracellular vesicles in neurodegenerative diseases, *Translational neurodegeneration* 12 (1) (2023) 43.
- [83] Y. Couch, Challenges associated with using extracellular vesicles as biomarkers in neurodegenerative disease, *Expert Rev. Mol. Diagn.* 23 (12) (2023) 1091–1105.
- [84] Y. Yu, et al., Central nervous system-derived extracellular vesicles as biomarkers in Alzheimer's disease, *Int. J. Mol. Sci.* 26 (17) (2025) 8272.
- [85] C.P. Gonul, B. Karacicek, S. Genc, Neuron-derived extracellular vesicles: emerging biomarkers and functional mediators in Alzheimer's disease, with comparative insights into neurodevelopment and aging, *Dev. Neurobiol.* 85 (3) (2025) e22984.
- [86] M. Malaguarnera, A. Cabrera-Pastor, Emerging role of extracellular vesicles as biomarkers in neurodegenerative diseases and their clinical and therapeutic potential in central nervous system pathologies, *Int. J. Mol. Sci.* 25 (18) (2024) 10068.
- [87] C.P. Palanisamy, et al., New strategies of neurodegenerative disease treatment with extracellular vesicles (EVs) derived from mesenchymal stem cells (MSCs), *Theranostics* 13 (12) (2023) 4138.
- [88] V. Varshney, et al., Exploring exosome-based approaches for early diagnosis and treatment of neurodegenerative diseases, *Mol. Neurobiol.* (2025) 1–23.
- [89] L. Giovannelli, et al., Mesenchymal stem cell secretome and extracellular vesicles for neurodegenerative diseases: risk-benefit profile and next steps for the market access, *Bioact. Mater.* 29 (2023) 16–35.
- [90] H. Zhao, et al., Extracellular vesicles-based theranostics for neurodegenerative diseases, *Wiley Interdiscip. Rev. Nanomed. Nanobiotechnol.* 16 (5) (2024) e1993.
- [91] M.A. Kumar, et al., Extracellular vesicles as tools and targets in therapy for diseases, *Signal Transduct. Target. Ther.* 9 (1) (2024) 27.