

Pharmacology I

Lecture 5

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The Autonomic Nervous System

The autonomic nervous system (ANS), along with the endocrine system, coordinates the regulation and integration of bodily functions. The endocrine system sends signals to target tissues by varying the levels of blood-borne hormones. In contrast, the nervous system exerts its influence by the rapid transmission of electrical impulses over nerve fibers that terminate at effector cells, which specifically respond to the release of neuromediator substances. Drugs that produce their primary therapeutic effect by mimicking or altering the functions of the ANS are called autonomic drugs. These autonomic agents act either by stimulating portions of the ANS or by blocking the action of the autonomic nerves.

The nervous system is divided into two anatomical divisions: the central nervous system (CNS), which is composed of the brain and spinal cord, and the peripheral nervous system, which includes neurons located outside the brain and spinal cord—that is, any nerves that enter or leave the CNS (Figure 1). The peripheral nervous system is subdivided into the efferent and afferent divisions. The efferent neurons carry signals away from the brain and spinal cord to the peripheral tissues, and the afferent neurons bring information from the periphery to the CNS. Afferent neurons provide sensory input to modulate the function of the efferent division through reflex arcs or neural pathways that mediate a reflex action.

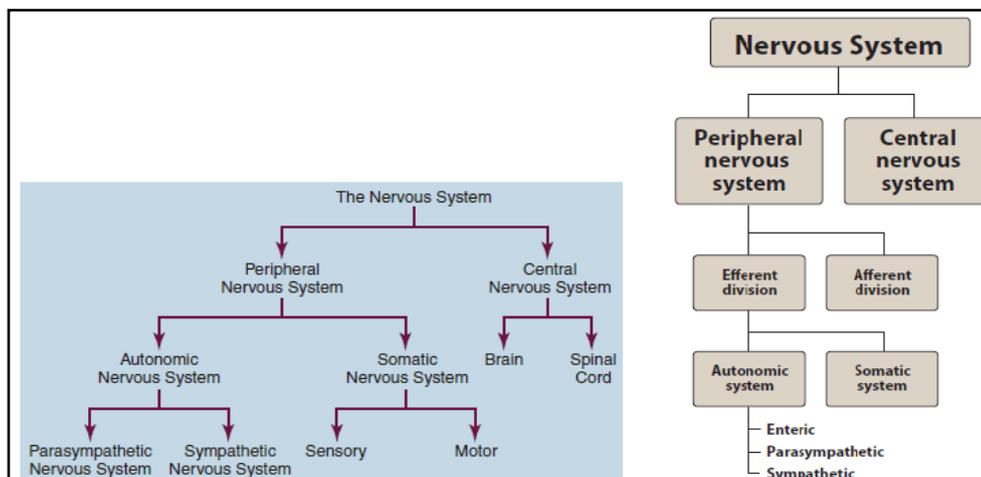


Figure 1: Organization of the nervous system

Functional divisions within the nervous system

The efferent portion of the peripheral nervous system is further divided into two major functional subdivisions: the somatic and the ANS (Figure 3.1). The somatic efferent neurons are involved in the voluntary control of functions such as contraction of the skeletal muscles essential for locomotion. The ANS, conversely, regulates the everyday requirements of vital bodily functions without the conscious participation of the mind. Because of the involuntary nature of the ANS as well as its functions, it is also known as the visceral, vegetative, or involuntary nervous system. It is composed of efferent neurons that innervate smooth muscle of the viscera, cardiac muscle, vasculature, and the exocrine glands, thereby controlling digestion, cardiac output, blood flow, and glandular secretions.

Anatomy of the ANS

The ANS carries nerve impulses from the CNS to the effector organs by way of two types of efferent neurons: the preganglionic neurons and the postganglionic neurons (Figure 2).

The cell body of the first nerve cell, the preganglionic neuron, is located within the CNS. The preganglionic neurons emerge from the brainstem or spinal cord and make a synaptic connection in ganglia (an aggregation of nerve cell bodies located in the peripheral nervous system). The ganglia function as relay stations between the preganglionic neuron and the second nerve cell, the postganglionic neuron. The cell body of the postganglionic neuron originates in the ganglion. It is generally nonmyelinated and terminates on effector organs, such as smooth muscles of the viscera, cardiac muscle, and the exocrine glands.

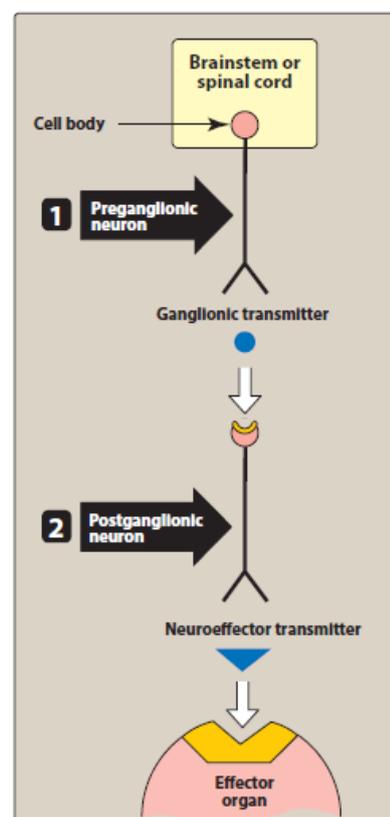


Figure 2: Efferent neurons of the autonomic nervous system.

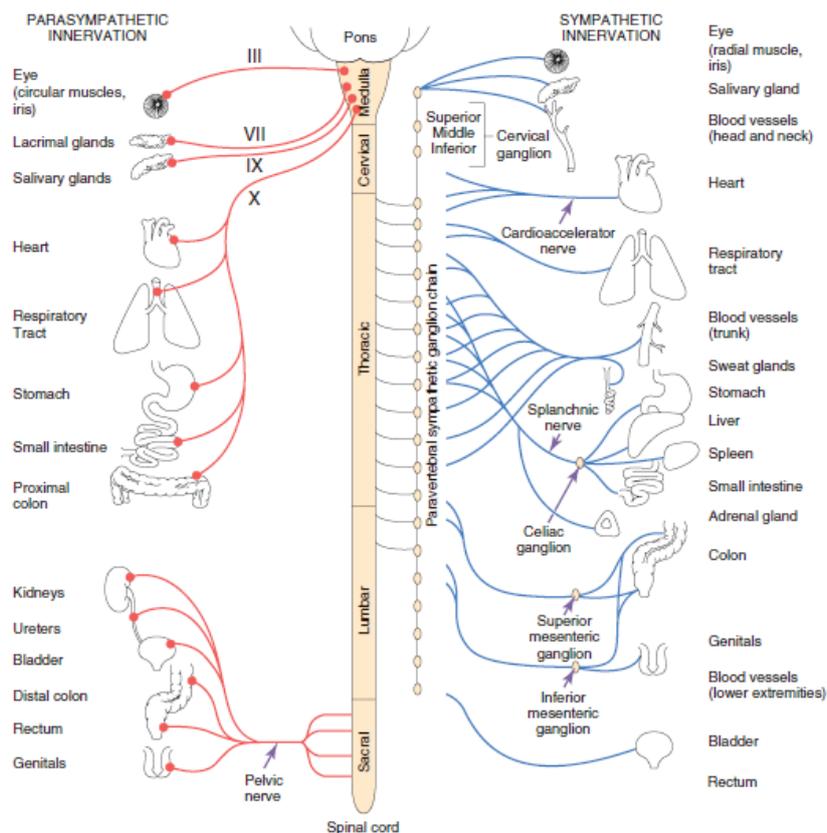
Sympathetic neurons:

The efferent ANS is divided into the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems, as well as the enteric nervous system (Figure 1). Anatomically, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic neurons originate in the CNS and emerge from

two different spinal cord regions. The preganglionic neurons of the sympathetic system come from the thoracic and lumbar regions (T1 to L2) of the spinal cord, and they synapse in two cord-like chains of ganglia that run close to and in parallel on each side of the spinal cord. The preganglionic neurons are short in comparison to the postganglionic ones.

Axons of the postganglionic neuron extend from these ganglia to the tissues that they innervate and regulate. In most cases, the preganglionic nerve endings of the sympathetic nervous system are highly branched, enabling one preganglionic neuron to interact with many postganglionic neurons. This arrangement enables this division to activate numerous effector organs at the same time.

[Note: The adrenal medulla, like the sympathetic ganglia, receives preganglionic fibers from the sympathetic system. The adrenal medulla, in response to stimulation by the ganglionic neurotransmitter acetylcholine, secretes epinephrine (adrenaline), and lesser amounts of norepinephrine, directly into the blood].



Parasympathetic neurons:

The parasympathetic preganglionic fibers arise from cranial nerves III (oculomotor), VII (facial), IX (glossopharyngeal), and X (vagus), as well as from the

sacral region (S2 to S4) of the spinal cord and synapse in ganglia near or on the effector organs.

Thus, in contrast to the sympathetic system, the preganglionic fibers are long, and the postganglionic ones are short, with the ganglia close to or within the organ innervated. In most instances, there is a one-to-one connection between the preganglionic and postganglionic neurons, enabling discrete response of this system.

Enteric neurons:

The enteric nervous system is the third division of the ANS. It is a collection of nerve fibers that innervate the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, pancreas, and gallbladder, and it constitutes the “brain of the gut.” This system functions independently of the CNS and controls the motility, exocrine and endocrine secretions, and microcirculation of the GI tract. It is modulated by both the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems.

Functions of the sympathetic nervous system

Although continually active to some degree (for example, in maintaining the tone of vascular beds), the sympathetic division has the property of adjusting in response to stressful situations, such as trauma, fear, hypoglycemia, cold, and exercise (Figure 3).

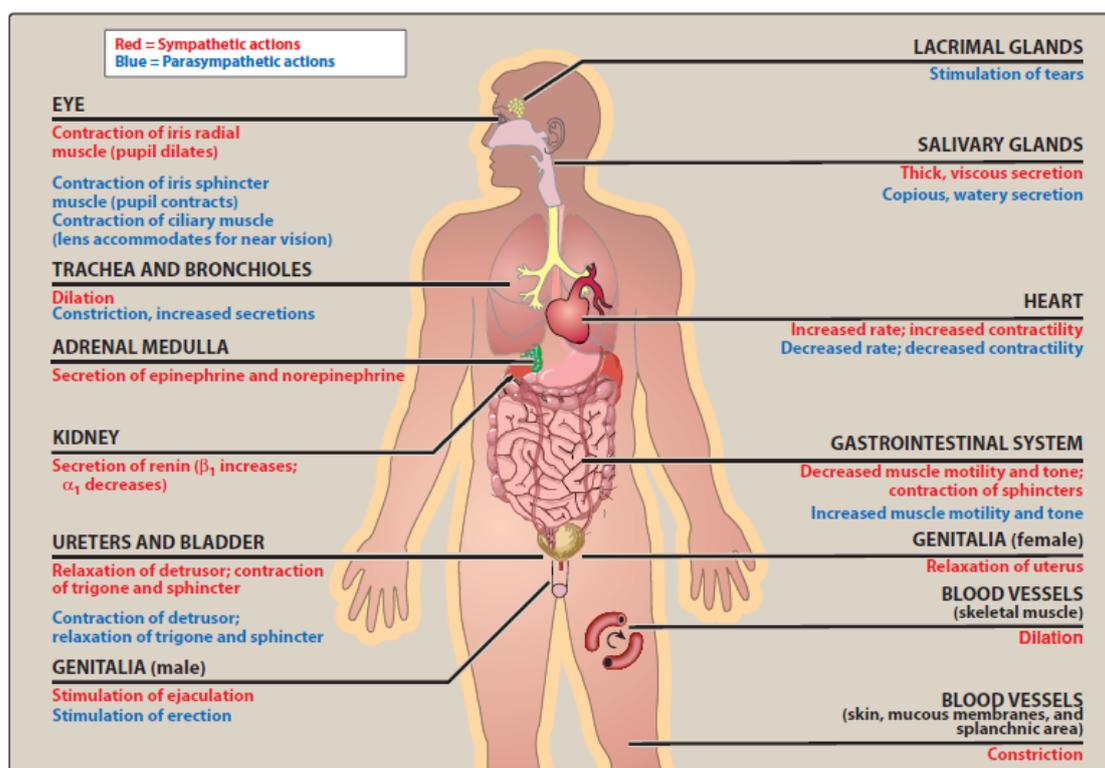


Figure 3: Actions of sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems on effector organs.

1. Effects of stimulation of the sympathetic division:

The effect of sympathetic output is to increase heart rate and blood pressure, to mobilize energy stores of the body, and to increase blood flow to skeletal muscles and the heart while diverting flow from the skin and internal organs. Sympathetic stimulation results in dilation of the pupils and the bronchioles (Figure 3). It also affects GI motility and the function of the bladder and sexual organs.

2. Fight-or-flight response:

The changes experienced by the body during emergencies are referred to as the “fight or flight” response (Figure 4). These reactions are triggered both by direct sympathetic activation of the effector organs and by stimulation of the adrenal medulla to release epinephrine and lesser amounts of norepinephrine. Hormones released by the adrenal medulla directly enter the bloodstream and promote responses in effector organs that contain adrenergic receptors. The sympathetic nervous system tends to function as a unit and often discharges as a complete system, for example, during severe exercise or in reactions to fear (Figure 4). This system, with its diffuse distribution of postganglionic fibers, is involved in a wide array of physiologic activities. Although it is not essential for survival, it is nevertheless an important system that prepares the body to handle uncertain situations and unexpected stimuli.

Functions of the parasympathetic nervous system

The parasympathetic division is involved with maintaining homeostasis within the body. It is required for life, since it maintains essential bodily functions, such as digestion and elimination of wastes.

The parasympathetic division usually acts to oppose or balance the actions of the sympathetic division and generally predominates the sympathetic system in “rest-and-digest” situations. Unlike the sympathetic system, the parasympathetic system never discharges as a complete system. If it did, it would produce massive, undesirable, and unpleasant symptoms, such as involuntary urination and defecation.

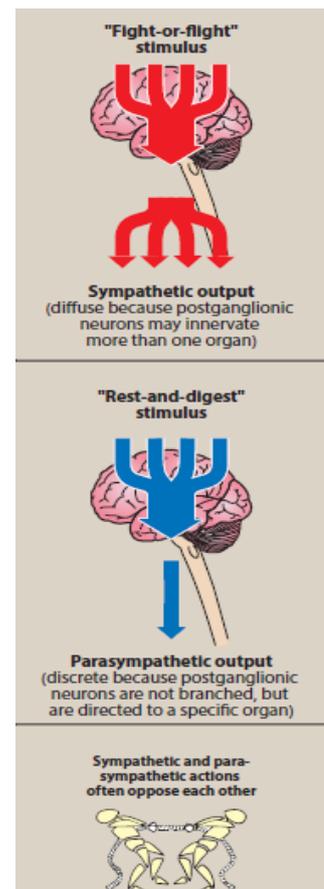


Figure 4: Sympathetic and parasympathetic actions are elicited by different stimuli.

Instead, parasympathetic fibers innervating specific organs such as the gut, heart, or eye are activated separately, and the system functions to affect these organs individually.

Role of the CNS in the control of autonomic functions

Although the ANS is a motor system, it does require sensory input from peripheral structures to provide information on the current state of the body. This feedback is provided by streams of afferent impulses, originating in the viscera and other autonomically innervated structures that travel to integrating centers in the CNS, such as the hypothalamus, medulla oblongata, and spinal cord. These centers respond to the stimuli by sending out efferent reflex impulses via the ANS.

Innervation by the ANS

1. Dual innervation:

Most organs in the body are innervated by both divisions of the ANS. Thus, vagal parasympathetic innervation slows the heart rate, and sympathetic innervation increases the heart rate. Despite this dual innervation, one system usually predominates in controlling the activity of a given organ. For example, in the heart, the vagus nerve is the predominant factor for controlling rate. This type of antagonism is considered to be dynamic and is fine tuned continually to control homeostatic organ functions.

2. Organs receiving only sympathetic innervation:

Although most tissues receive dual innervation, some effector organs, such as the adrenal medulla, kidney, pilomotor muscles, and sweat glands, receive innervation only from the sympathetic system.

Somatic nervous system

The efferent somatic nervous system differs from the ANS in that a single myelinated motor neuron, originating in the CNS, travels directly to skeletal muscle without the mediation of ganglia. As noted earlier, the somatic nervous system is under voluntary control, whereas the ANS is involuntary.

CHEMICAL SIGNALING BETWEEN CELLS

Neurotransmission in the ANS is an example of the more general process of chemical signaling between cells. In addition to neurotransmission, other types of chemical signaling include the secretion of hormones and the release of local mediators.

A. Hormones

Specialized endocrine cells secrete hormones into the bloodstream, where they travel throughout the body, exerting effects on broadly distributed target cells (figure 5).

B. Local mediators

Most cells in the body secrete chemicals that act locally on cells in the immediate environment. Because these chemical signals are rapidly destroyed or removed, they do not enter the blood and are not distributed throughout the body. Histamine and the prostaglandins are examples of local mediators.

C. Neurotransmitters

Communication between nerve cells, and between nerve cells and effector organs, occurs through the release of specific chemical signals (neurotransmitters) from the nerve terminals. This release is triggered by the arrival of the action potential at the nerve terminals, leading to depolarization. An increase in intracellular Ca^{2+} initiates fusion of the synaptic vesicles with the presynaptic membrane and release of their contents. The neurotransmitters rapidly diffuse across the synaptic cleft, or space (synapse), between neurons and combine with specific receptors on the postsynaptic (target) cell.

1. Membrane receptors: All neurotransmitters, and most hormones and local mediators, are too hydrophilic to penetrate the lipid bilayers of target cell plasma membranes. Instead, their signal is mediated by binding to specific receptors on the cell surface of target organs.

2. Types of neurotransmitters: Although over 50 signal molecules in the nervous system have been identified, norepinephrine (and the closely related epinephrine), acetylcholine, dopamine, serotonin, histamine, glutamate, and γ -aminobutyric acid are

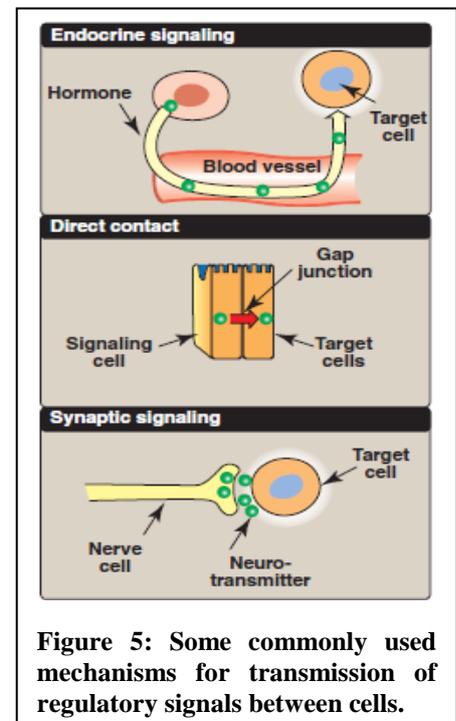


Figure 5: Some commonly used mechanisms for transmission of regulatory signals between cells.

most commonly involved in the actions of therapeutically useful drugs. Each of these chemical signals binds to a specific family of receptors. Acetylcholine and norepinephrine are the primary chemical signals in the ANS, whereas a wide variety of neurotransmitters function in the CNS.

a. Acetylcholine: The autonomic nerve fibers can be divided into two groups based on the type of neurotransmitter released. If transmission is mediated by acetylcholine, the neuron is termed cholinergic (Figure 6). Acetylcholine mediates the transmission of nerve impulses across autonomic ganglia in both the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. It is the neurotransmitter at the adrenal medulla.

Transmission from the autonomic postganglionic nerves to the effector organs in the parasympathetic system also involves the release of acetylcholine.

In the somatic nervous system, transmission at the neuromuscular junction (the junction of nerve fibers and voluntary muscles) is also cholinergic (Figure 6).

b. Norepinephrine and epinephrine: When norepinephrine and epinephrine are the neurotransmitters, the fiber is termed adrenergic (Figure 6). In the sympathetic system, norepinephrine mediates the transmission of nerve impulses from autonomic postganglionic nerves to effector organs.

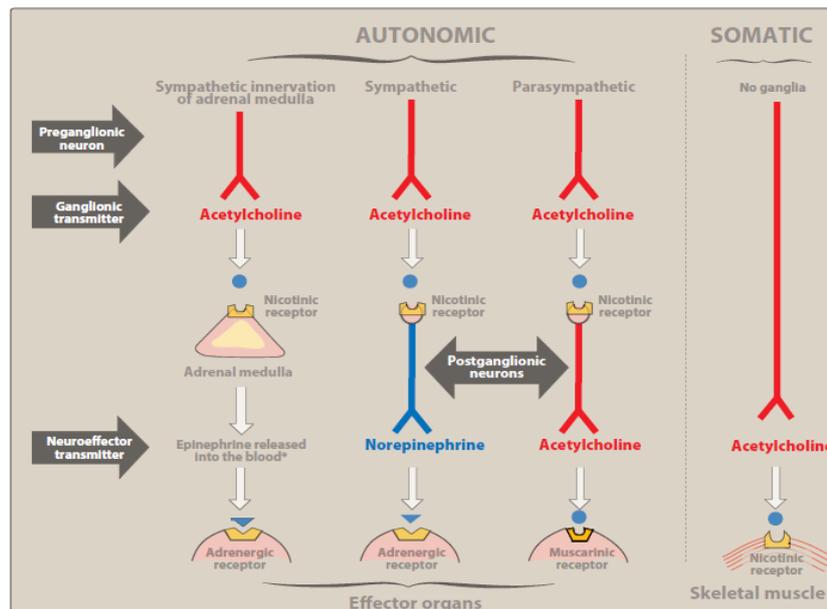


Figure 6: Summary of the neurotransmitters released, types of receptors, and types of neurons within the autonomic and somatic nervous systems. Cholinergic neurons are shown in red and adrenergic neurons in blue. [Note: This schematic diagram does not show that the parasympathetic ganglia are close to or on the surface of the effector organs and that, the postganglionic fibers are usually shorter than the preganglionic fibers. By contrast, the ganglia of the sympathetic nervous system are close to the spinal cord. The postganglionic fibers are long, allowing extensive branching to innervate more than one organ system. This allows the sympathetic nervous system to discharge as a unit.] *Epinephrine 80% and norepinephrine 20% released from adrenal medulla.

SIGNAL TRANSDUCTION IN THE EFFECTOR CELL

The binding of chemical signals to receptors activates enzymatic processes within the cell membrane that ultimately results in a cellular response, such as the phosphorylation of intracellular proteins or changes in the conductivity of ion channels. A neurotransmitter can be thought of as a signal and a receptor as a signal detector and transducer.

Second messenger molecules produced in response to a neurotransmitter binding to a receptor translate the extracellular signal into a response that may be further propagated or amplified within the cell. Each component serves as a link in the communication between extracellular events and chemical changes within the cell.

A. Membrane receptors affecting ion permeability (ionotropic receptors)

Neurotransmitter receptors are membrane proteins that provide a binding site that recognizes and responds to neurotransmitter molecules.

Some receptors, such as the postsynaptic nicotinic receptors in the skeletal muscle cells, are directly linked to membrane ion channels.

Therefore, binding of the neurotransmitter occurs rapidly (within fractions of a millisecond) and directly affects ion permeability (Figure 3.8A). These types of receptors are known as ionotropic receptors.

B. Membrane receptors coupled to second messengers (metabotropic receptors)

Many receptors are not directly coupled to ion channels. Rather, the receptor signals its recognition of a bound neurotransmitter by initiating a series of reactions that ultimately result in a specific intracellular response. Second messenger molecules, so named because they intervene between the original message (the neurotransmitter or hormone) and the ultimate effect on the cell, are part of the cascade of events that translate neurotransmitter binding into a cellular response, usually through the intervention of a G protein. The two most widely recognized second messengers are the adenylyl cyclase system and the calcium/phosphatidylinositol system (Figure 3.8 B, C).

The receptors coupled to the second messenger system are known as metabotropic receptors. Muscarinic and adrenergic receptors are examples of metabotropic receptors.

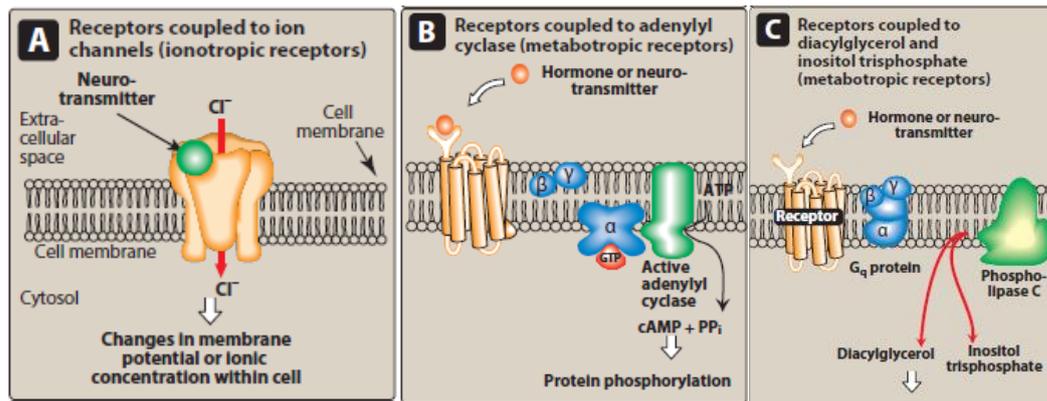


Figure 8: Three mechanisms whereby binding of a neurotransmitter leads to a cellular effect.

	SYMPATHETIC	PARASYMPATHETIC
Sites of origin	Thoracic and lumbar region of the spinal cord (thoracolumbar)	Brain and sacral area of the spinal cord (craniosacral)
Length of fibers	Short preganglionic Long postganglionic	Long preganglionic Short postganglionic
Location of ganglia	Close to the spinal cord	Within or near effector organs
Preganglionic fiber branching	Extensive	Minimal
Distribution	Wide	Limited
Type of response	Diffuse	Discrete