

1 *Review*

## 2 **Does Irisin Link Physical Exercise with Alzheimer's** 3 **Disease?**

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13 **Abstract:** The skeletal muscle-secreted myokine irisin, which is produced in response to physical  
14 exercise, has several protective functions both in the central and peripheral nervous systems,  
15 including regulation of brain-derived neurotrophic factor, modification of telomere length,  
16 inhibition of the endoplasmic reticulum stress response, and anti-inflammatory and anti-apoptotic  
17 effects that may be of benefit in neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's disease (AD). The  
18 present review is based on the hypothesis that irisin connects physical exercise with AD  
19 progression. We herein describe current knowledge of the physiology of irisin and its potential role  
20 in AD. We conclude that, although current and ongoing research on irisin is very promising,  
21 further research is required to clarify its potential as a meaningful target for drugs to treat human  
22 diseases.

23 **Keywords:** physical exercise; irisin; neurodegeneration; aging; Alzheimer's disease  
24

### 25 **1. Introduction**

26 Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a devastating age-associated neurodegenerative disorder  
27 characterized by progressive cognitive and functional decline. Extracellular amyloid- $\beta$  (A $\beta$ )  
28 aggregation and intracellular neurofibrillary tangles are considered the pathological hallmarks of  
29 AD. Notwithstanding several previous studies, the etiology of AD is largely unknown. However, a  
30 series of neurodegenerative events in the hippocampus, as well as microglial activation,  
31 neuroinflammation, oxidative stress, metabolic energy failure, and consequent neuronal apoptosis  
32 are believed to be closely correlated with the pathogenesis of AD [1–6].

33 Physical exercise is currently advocated as a behavioral intervention to ameliorate neurological  
34 impairments [7]; however, the precise cellular mechanism remains elusive. Many studies have  
35 highlighted the effects of exercise in various organs, such as the liver, brain, adipose tissue, and  
36 heart. Unlike other organs, skeletal muscle is directly affected by exercise [8]. Skeletal muscle has  
37 been identified as a secretory organ since it produces and releases cytokines and other peptides that  
38 function similarly to hormones [9]. These secretions may underlie the beneficial effects of exercise.  
39 The identification of several hundred components in the 'secretome' of skeletal muscle provides the  
40 basis for understanding how muscle communicates with other organs [8]. Irisin was recently  
41 identified as a muscle-derived myokine is released from skeletal muscle immediately after exercise.  
42 In this review, we discuss the plausible mechanism of the protective effects of irisin against AD.  
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## 46 2. Association between neuroinflammation and AD

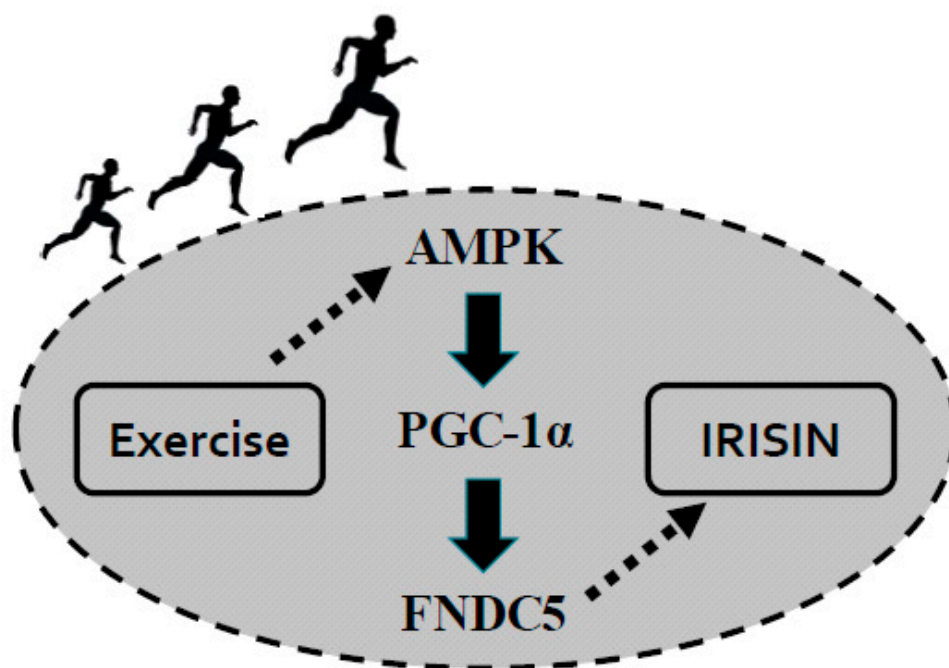
47 Neuroinflammation in AD is characterized by glial activation and the release of inflammatory  
48 mediators, which provoke a ferocious cycle of neuroinflammatory attack [10]. As the first defensive  
49 response against brain injury, microglia shows their diverse phenotypes in response to specific  
50 signals from the microenvironment [11]. Two major phenotypes of activated microglia have been  
51 proposed: 1) a classically activated M1 pro-inflammatory phenotype that releases destructive  
52 pro-inflammatory mediators (e.g., interleukin [IL]-1 $\beta$ , IL-6, and tumor necrosis factor [TNF]-alpha,  
53 and 2) a selectively activated M2 repair/anti-inflammatory phenotype that secretes neuroprotective,  
54 anti-inflammatory factors (e.g., IL-4 and IL-10) [10, 11]. Interestingly, divergent roles for M1 and M2  
55 polarized microglia have been reported in several neurodegenerative diseases, including AD, stroke,  
56 and spinal cord injury [11, 14–16], which raise the possibility that modulation of the microglial  
57 phenotype could yield translational benefits in these neurodegenerative disorders.

58 In addition to a role for neuroinflammation, there is adequate evidence that oxidative stress  
59 plays an important pathogenic role in AD [17–19]. It was previously demonstrated that oxidative  
60 stress leads to irreversible impairment of biological systems due to the oxidation of most of the  
61 major biomolecules in cells, including DNA, RNA, proteins, and lipids [20]. In fact, oxidation  
62 leading to a buildup of damaging oxidative byproducts has been consistently reported in AD  
63 progression, surprisingly at the preliminary stage before crucial senile plaques have formed [21–23].  
64 Furthermore, the accumulation of reactive oxygen species in mitochondria causes subsequent  
65 destruction of the electron transfer chain leading to metabolic energy failure and mitochondrial  
66 dysfunction [24–26], which is crucial in AD pathology [27, 28].  
67

## 68 3. Irisin as a mediator of the beneficial effects of exercise on the brain

69 Exercise, particularly endurance exercise, has salutary effects on brain health and cognitive  
70 function [29–31]. The improvement in cognitive function following exercise may be beneficial to  
71 older adults [32]. Exercise has also been reported to ameliorate negative outcomes in neurological  
72 diseases, such as depression, epilepsy, stroke, AD, and Parkinson's disease (PD) [33–38]. The  
73 beneficial effects of exercise on the brain are most discernible in the hippocampus and its dentate  
74 gyrus, a region of the brain associated with learning and memory. The markedly favorable effects of  
75 exercise on the brain include increases in the size of, and blood flow to, the hippocampus in humans,  
76 morphological variations in dendrites and dendritic spines, increased synaptic plasticity and,  
77 importantly, de novo neurogenesis in the dentate gyrus in various animal models [29, 30]. De novo  
78 neurogenesis in the mature brain is believed to occur in only two areas, one of which is the dentate  
79 gyrus of the hippocampus; exercise is one of the few known stimuli of this de novo neurogenesis  
80 [39].

81 The discovery of the “exercise hormone” irisin has attracted a great deal of attention [40]. Irisin  
82 was identified as a communicator between skeletal muscle and adipocytes; thus, it acts as a potent  
83 messenger of the positive effects of physical exercise on target organs other than muscle [41] (Figure  
84 1). Human studies have demonstrated that 10 weeks of physical training resulted in increased  
85 plasma levels of irisin [40]. Subsequent studies substantiated acute exercise-altered irisin levels [42,  
86 43]. The results were, however, more equivocal with respect to physical training interventions  
87 delivered over several weeks [44–47]. The observations that irisin administration increased the  
88 proliferation of hippocampal cells in vitro [48], and that the expression of fibronectin type III  
89 domain-containing 5 (FNDC5) resulted in elevated irisin concentrations and brain-derived  
90 neurotropic factor (BDNF) gene expression in culture [49], suggest that irisin could be a therapeutic  
91 target in neurodegenerative disorders [50–52].



92  
 93 **Figure 1.** Mechanisms of irisin biogenesis in the human body. 5'-adenosine  
 94 monophosphate-activated protein kinase (AMPK) leads to the creation of proliferator-activated  
 95 receptor gamma coactivator 1-alpha (PGC-1 $\alpha$ ). In turn, fibronectin type III domain-containing 5  
 96 (FNDC5) is expressed during prolonged exercise. FNDC5 is cleaved by an unknown peptidase and  
 97 secreted as irisin.

98

#### 99 4. Irisin

100 Irisin, a newly discovered skeletal muscle-derived myokine secreted during exercise, is also  
 101 synthesized in various tissues of different species [53]. It is secreted from FNDC5 after cleavage of its  
 102 extracellular portion [54]. The production of irisin occurs similarly to the shedding and release of  
 103 other hormones and hormone-like polypeptides, such as epidermal growth factor and transforming  
 104 growth factor  $\alpha$ , from transmembrane precursors. After the N-terminal signal peptide is withdrawn,  
 105 the peptide is proteolytically cleaved from the C-terminal moiety, glycosylated, and released as a  
 106 hormone of 112 amino acids. This molecule upregulates uncoupling protein 1 (UCP1) and  
 107 transforms white adipose tissue (WAT) into brown adipose tissue (BAT), thereby increasing  
 108 thermogenesis and the energy consumption of adipose tissue [51]. In addition, it ameliorates insulin  
 109 resistance, lowers blood glucose, and promotes weight loss. Studies have shown that irisin further  
 110 encourages cell proliferation and inhibits cell apoptosis. Previous studies have also indicated that  
 111 irisin sustains the levels, and increases the proliferation, of human umbilical vein endothelial cells  
 112 [55]. Irisin was also shown to increase the proliferation of H19-7 mouse hippocampal neurons [56].  
 113 Meanwhile, irisin suppresses the high-glucose-induced apoptosis of vascular endothelial cells and  
 114 improves their function via the extracellular signal-regulated kinase (ERK) and the 5'-adenosine  
 115 monophosphate-activated protein kinase (AMPK)-PI3K-protein kinase B (Akt)-eNOS signaling  
 116 pathways [55, 57, 58]. Furthermore, by interfering with oxidative stress and inflammation, irisin  
 117 protects against palmitic acid-induced apoptosis in liver cells [59].

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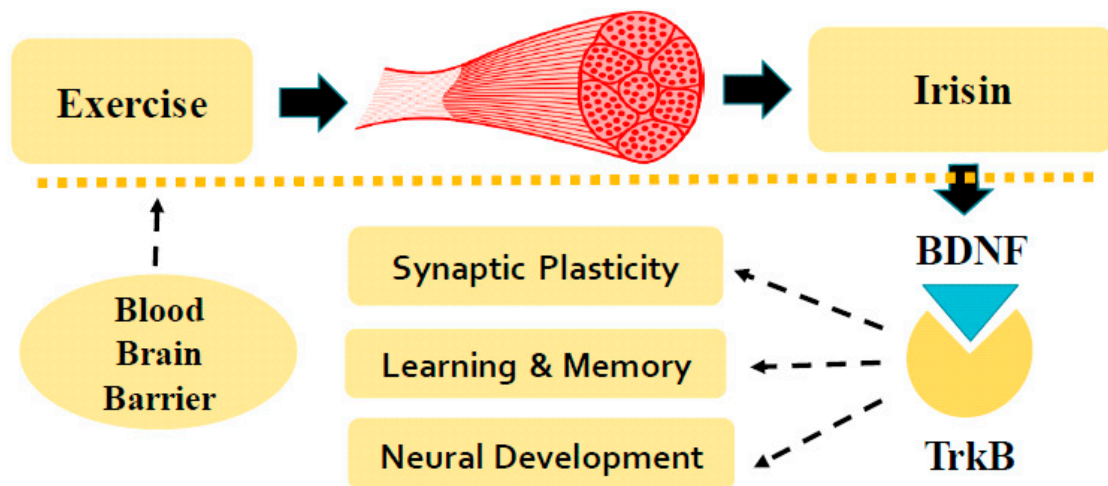
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## 121 5. AMPK/FNDC5/IRISIN/BDNF signaling

122 There are many good reasons to be physically active, including to reduce the odds of  
 123 developing heart disease, stroke, and diabetes. The activation of various signaling pathways, such as  
 124 AMPK pathway, contributes to the beneficial effects of exercise [60, 61]. As irisin is an  
 125 exercise-induced hormone, the intriguing question of whether it links physical activity with brain  
 126 function has been raised. Wrann et al. reported that irisin is elevated in the hippocampal tissue of  
 127 mice by endurance exercise [62]. Moreover, they showed that forced expression of FNDC5 in  
 128 primary cortical neurons increased BDNF expression, and peripheral delivery of FNDC5 to the liver  
 129 induced BDNF expression in the hippocampus [62]. Because BDNF is a critical regulator of neural  
 130 plasticity, irisin may act as a key regulator of neuronal survival following neurodegenerative  
 131 diseases such as AD (Figure 2).

132 As one of the well-known neurotrophins, BDNF is responsible for regulating the growth,  
 133 function, and survival of neurons, as well as synaptic stabilization and branching [63]. BDNF is  
 134 believed to be involved in the pathophysiology of central nervous system diseases associated with  
 135 neuroinflammation [63]. Neuroinflammation refers to the inflammation of nervous tissue and can  
 136 lead to neurodegenerative disorders, including AD. Evidence from human neuropathological  
 137 studies has indicated that the levels of neurotrophins-nerve growth factor and BDNF are lower in  
 138 AD [64]. These studies demonstrated that BDNF mRNA levels were significantly reduced at very  
 139 early stages of amyloid pathology in a transgenic rat model of AD. Furthermore, ileocecal valve  
 140 A $\beta$ -treated rats manifested a memory deficit and significantly decreased BDNF levels, with a  
 141 concurrent increase in mitochondrial oxidative damage and inflammatory mediators in the  
 142 hippocampus [65].

143 In summary, it is hypothesized that a decrease in irisin levels may cause AD pathogenesis and  
 144 cognitive deficits. These phenomena are highly associated with neuroinflammation and apoptosis,  
 145 mediated by a dramatic decrease of BDNF.



146 **Figure 2.** Cross-talk between irisin and neurohormones in the brain. Exercise improves cognitive  
 147 function and the outcomes of neurodegenerative diseases, such as AD. This effect has been linked to  
 148 the increased expression of brain-derived neurotropic factor (BDNF). Particularly, in the brain,  
 149 BDNF is activated by binding with the TrkB receptor, resulting in synaptic plasticity, learning,  
 150 memory, and neural development. Importantly, irisin is a key player that increases the expression of  
 151 BDNF and acts as a mediator between exercise and brain development.  
 152

153

## 154 6. IRISIN/AKT/ERK signaling pathway

155 Irisin was previously reported to be expressed in the brain, as well as skeletal muscle and the  
156 heart [66]. This hormone largely inhibits brain infarct volume and reduces neuroinflammation and  
157 post-ischemic oxidative stress. One group of scientists demonstrated that irisin activates the Akt and  
158 ERK1/2 signaling pathways in brain tissue [67]. Previous studies have also shown that irisin  
159 stimulates ERK1/2 signaling in adipocytes [68], endothelial cells [69], and bone marrow stromal cells  
160 [70], and activates Akt signaling in hepatocytes [71]. These results indicate that the activation of both  
161 Akt and ERK1/2 may be important for the neuroprotective effects of irisin because specific chemical  
162 inhibitors of the Akt and ERK1/2 pathways abolished the neuroprotection conferred by irisin. The  
163 same group also proved that mouse plasma irisin levels are negatively correlated with plasma  
164 TNF- $\alpha$  and IL-6 levels [67]. Finally, they demonstrated that the novel exercise-induced hormone  
165 irisin protects against neuronal injury via activation of the Akt and ERK1/2 signaling pathways [67].  
166 These results suggest that irisin contributes to the neuroprotective effects of physical exercise in  
167 cerebral ischemia and is a promising agent for the prevention and treatment of ischemic stroke.  
168 Recent research has disclosed a role for chronic neuroinflammation in the pathophysiology of  
169 neurodegenerative diseases such as AD, and attention has focused the use of anti-TNF and  
170 TNF-modulating agents for prevention and treatment [72]. The brains of treated animals exhibited a  
171 significant reduction in pro-inflammatory TNF- $\alpha$ , and a diminished burden of neurofibrillary  
172 tangles, amyloid precursor protein, and  $\beta$ -amyloid plaques. The brief discussion above allows a  
173 clearer mechanistic understanding of the role of proinflammatory mediators such as TNF- $\alpha$  in AD,  
174 and suggests that irisin could be a novel target to reduce proinflammatory mediators for the  
175 prevention or treatment of AD.

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## 177 7. Irisin, as a biomarker of age-dependent telomere shortening, is associated with AD 178 pathogenesis

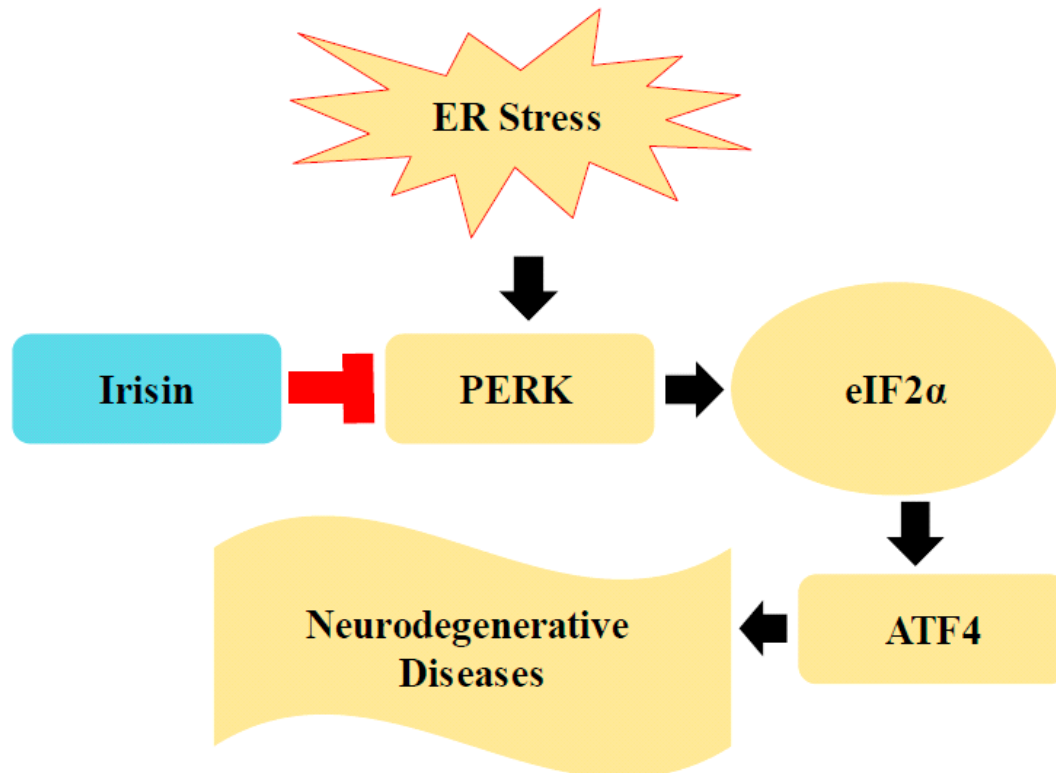
179 Telomeres are the caps at the end of each DNA strand that preserve our chromosomes, similar to the  
180 plastic tips at the ends of shoelaces [73]. Without this coating, shoelaces become frayed until they can  
181 no longer do their job; in the same manner, without telomeres DNA strands become damaged so  
182 that our cells cannot perform their job. Telomere shortening is associated with all aspects of the  
183 aging process on a cellular level. Telomere length (TL) describes our biological age as opposed to our  
184 chronological age. Numerous empirical studies have uncovered a strong connection between short  
185 telomeres and cellular aging [74]. For example, the immune system, which normally atrophies as we  
186 age, is highly sensitive to telomere shortening [75]. Telomere shortening has been confirmed to play  
187 a causative role in age-related neurodegenerative diseases, including AD. Telomere shortening has  
188 also been associated with cognitive impairment, amyloid pathology, and hyper-phosphorylation of  
189 Tau in AD, and plays a significant role in the pathogenesis of AD via the mechanisms of oxidative  
190 stress and inflammation [76]. A shorter TL in leukocytes has been connected to age-related diabetes,  
191 and cardiovascular and heart diseases, as well as an elevated risk of neurodegenerative diseases,  
192 including dementia [77]. It seems that long-term chronic inflammation and/or oxidative stress  
193 accelerate telomere shortening in monocytes [78]. In addition, since TL is shortened by aging, elderly  
194 populations are more susceptible to AD. Interestingly, microglia also exhibit shorter telomeres in the  
195 brains of AD subjects, suggesting that these cells undergo early replicative senescence, which could  
196 be due to the intense amyloid plaque profusion seen in AD [79]. Monocytes migrate through the  
197 blood-brain barrier in AD and convert into microglial cells in the brain, and microglial activation has  
198 been reported to be associated with amyloid-plaques in the AD brain [80]. Additionally, increased  
199 expression of chemokine receptors and cytokines in the peripheral blood mononuclear cells of AD  
200 patients has been reported [81]. Previous studies have reported that lifestyle factors, including  
201 exercise, can have a notable impact on the accumulation of DNA damage and TL [82]. The discovery  
202 of irisin, which prompts a peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma coactivator 1-alpha

203 (PGC1- $\alpha$ )- dependent 'browning' of WAT to a BAT-like phenotype, and upregulates thermogenesis  
204 and energy expenditure, may represent a novel mechanism by which modest exercise attenuates  
205 age-related decline. Recently, Karan et al. [83] demonstrated that plasma irisin levels showed a  
206 significant correlation with TL. The shortening of TL with aging is well-understood and, as expected,  
207 shows an inverse relationship with age. Since plasma irisin is likely associated with TL, irisin may  
208 exhibit anti-aging properties. Previous research has reported that exercise, which increases plasma  
209 irisin, can modulate TL [84-86]. The data presented herein describe a potential mechanism by which  
210 exercise is associated with an increased TL. Previously published data have uncovered that irisin  
211 activates signaling pathways connected to the regulation of cellular proliferation, including p38  
212 MAPK [87], which regulates cellular proliferation and the expression of human telomere reverse  
213 transcriptase [88]. In summary, it is hypothesized the age-related decrease of irisin may be a cause  
214 of AD pathogenesis and cognitive impairments. This association is highly linked to telomere  
215 shortening induced by oxidative stress and inflammation.

## 216 8. Reduction of endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress responses by irisin in AD

217 The ER is associated with several crucial cellular functions (e.g., protein folding, quality control,  
218 maintenance of Ca<sup>2+</sup> balance, and cholesterol synthesis). Many genetic and environmental insults  
219 can disrupt the function of the ER, resulting in ER stress. Therefore, it is not surprising that a number  
220 of studies have reported that ER stress is linked with several neurodegenerative diseases [89-91]. The  
221 unfolded protein response (UPR) induced by ER stress involves both immediate protein kinase  
222 responses and subsequent changes in the expression of hundreds of target genes [92, 93]. Evidence  
223 of activated UPR signaling has been revealed in AD, PD, and Huntington's disease, as well as in  
224 amyotrophic lateral sclerosis [94, 89-91]. Furthermore, cerebral ischemia can trigger the UPR,  
225 although this is clearly reduced by the concomitant dramatic decline in protein synthesis [95]. Recent  
226 studies have shown that ER stress can generate signals that warn neighboring cells and elicit  
227 inflammatory responses to prevent extensive tissue damage [96, 97]. In fact, moderate ER stress  
228 improves cellular protection by a series of changes called the 'hormetic response', which is  
229 characterized by alteration of the transcriptome and proteome of the cell, thus elevating the adaptive  
230 capacity of the ER [98, 99-102]. However, the prolonged ER stress manifested in neurodegenerative  
231 diseases is believed to disrupt the protective effects of the UPR, leading to the activation of  
232 inflammatory and apoptotic programs that promote neurotoxicity. Therefore, prolonged ER stress  
233 disrupts the protective mechanism of the UPR, leading to inflammation and apoptosis, which  
234 promote AD pathogenesis. Exercise believed to improve physical fitness and prevent chronic  
235 diseases and age-related disorders. Exercise promotes the expression of several myokines such as  
236 irisin, which is linked to the transcription factor PGC-1 $\alpha$  and is not related to ER-stress, whereas  
237 typical ER-stress-induced cytokines, such as fibroblast growth factor 21 and growth/differentiation  
238 factor 15 are not exercise-induced myokines under normal physiological conditions [103]. Recent  
239 studies have revealed that irisin dramatically suppresses the expression of phosphorylated PERK  
240 (protein kinase R-like endoplasmic reticulum kinase) and eIF2 $\alpha$  induces by oxidized low-density  
241 lipoprotein (ox-LDL) and tunicamycin, indicating that irisin alleviates ox-LDL-induced apoptosis  
242 via PERK/eIF2 $\alpha$ /CHOP/Bcl-2 CHOPERS signaling pathways [104]. It was previously reported that,  
243 among the four eIF2 $\alpha$  kinases, PERK is emerging as a key regulator of the memory impairments and  
244 neurodegeneration that characterize AD [105]. In summary, it is hypothesized that a sedentary  
245 lifestyle and aging are fundamental to irisin deficiency, which is directly followed by the  
246 development of AD. This is correlated with ER stress-induced disruption of the protective effects of  
247 the UPR and subsequent inflammation, apoptosis and, ultimately, AD (Figure 3).

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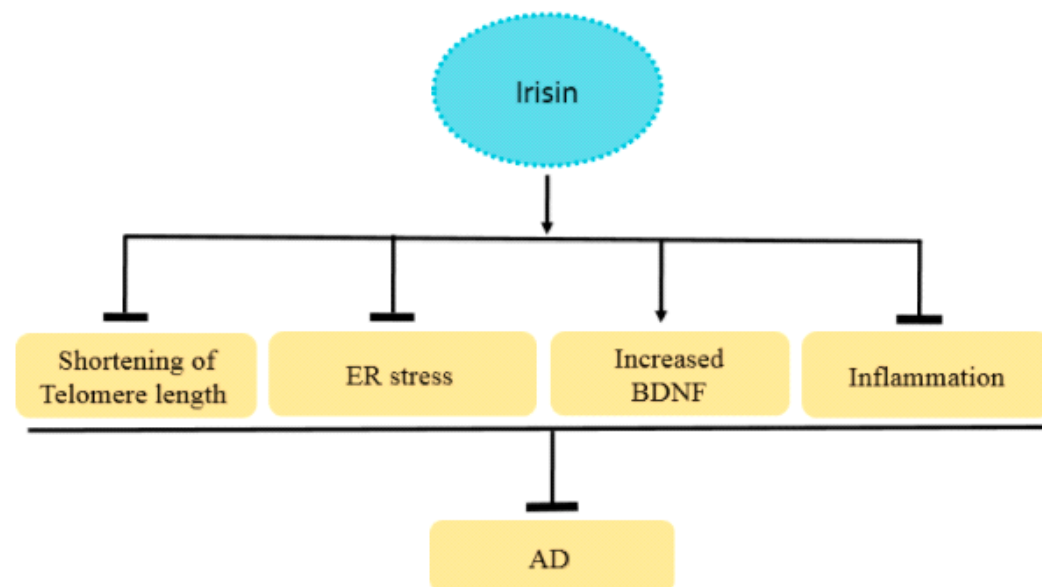
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250 **Figure 3.** Interrelationship between irisin and endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress responses in  
 251 degenerative brain diseases. Brain ER stress is caused by several disease-associated stressors,  
 252 including amyloid- $\beta$  ( $A\beta$ ) in Alzheimer's disease (AD). In such disorders, abnormal ER stress leads  
 253 to activation of the protein kinase R-like endoplasmic reticulum kinase (PERK)/eIF2 $\alpha$  signaling  
 254 pathway. ATF4 is a transcription factor that is activated translationally by eIF2 $\alpha$  phosphorylation  
 255 and plays a role in the transcriptional activation of CHOP in the integrated stress response.  
 256 Abnormally high eIF2 $\alpha$ -P levels increase ATF4 production and impair translation. Excessive  
 257 eIF2 $\alpha$ -P signaling and its downstream effectors impair cell function and may result in brain  
 258 dysfunction and neurodegeneration. Since irisin strongly inhibits PERK/eIF2  $\alpha$  signaling, it may  
 259 serve as become a novel therapeutic agent [104].

## 260 9. Conclusions

261 Several studies suggest that neuroinflammation in the brain may play a role in neurodegeneration  
 262 during aging. Reduced irisin levels in elderly populations may be a factor increasing the risk of AD.  
 263 During aging, chronic irisin deficiency may disrupt BDNF signaling, increase proinflammatory  
 264 mediators, shorten the TL, and upregulate the ER stress response. These age-related changes  
 265 accompany  $A\beta$  production, causing neuroinflammation and neurodegeneration. Regarding its  
 266 neuroprotective roles, including the regulation of BDNF signaling, age-dependent telomere  
 267 shortening, and anti-inflammatory and anti-apoptotic effects, irisin can be regarded as a therapeutic  
 268 candidate to prevent and treat AD (Figure 4).

269



270

271 **Figure 4.** A hypothetical model demonstrating the role of irisin in AD. A schematic diagram  
 272 depicting the potential molecular mechanisms underlying irisin-conferred protection against AD,  
 273 i.e., by inhibiting telomere shortening, reducing endoplasmic reticulum (ER) stress, increasing  
 274 BDNF and decreasing inflammation.

275

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 281 Sumsuzzman, Yunho Jin and Yonggeun Hong wrote the manuscript; Dewan Md. Sumsuzzman and Yunho Jin  
 282 collected the references and created the figures appearing in the manuscript under supervision by Yonggeun  
 283 Hong. All authors commented on the manuscript and approved the final form of manuscript.

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