No effect of transcranial direct current stimulation over the auditory cortex on auditory-evoked potentials

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Background

Transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) is a non-invasive brain stimulation technique to modulate cortical excitability. Various investigations have shown tDCS to modify behavior as well as symptom severity in psychiatric disorders. However, the underlying neural mechanisms causing behavioral effects are still hardly understood and results in recent investigations of tDCS effects on auditory processing, i.e. on auditory-evoked potentials (AEP), were inconsistent. In these recent investigations, sample sizes were small and reported results restricted to effects after stimulation. Thus, we aimed to investigate the effects of tDCS on auditory processing in more detail by including a larger population compared to earlier publications and by comparing effects of stimulation before, during, and after tDCS application.

Hypotheses

Based on results in earlier studies, we expected an increase of P50 amplitude after anodal compared to sham tDCS as well as a shortening of N100 latency.

Methods

We included 24 healthy subjects in a crossover design to receive anodal or sham tDCS in two sessions with one week apart (Figure 1).

Results

Our results showed no difference in AEP for anodal compared to sham stimulation and no difference in AEP after stimulation compared to baseline. Grand Averages of AEP separately for every condition are shown in Figure 3, mean amplitudes and latencies with standard derivations in Table 1.

Additionally, the TANOVA only showed some topographical differences for the different time points at 240-305 ms after stimulus onset (topographies for AEP peak intervals are shown in Figure 4).

Discussion

In contrast to our hypotheses, anodal tDCS did not change AEP when applied over the left posterior superior temporal cortex to target A1. Potential reasons for the negative findings could be the tDCS electrode montage or other parameters related to stimulation. Furthermore, we cannot exclude potential effects of cathodal stimulation that we might have missed due to our study design. The late effect we found for topographies for the different measurement time points reflects a habituation effect.

Conclusion

We were not able to replicate earlier results even when investigating the expected effects of tDCS in a larger cohort and with a longer duration of stimulation. Our results suggest that tDCS fails to substantially modify basic processing in the auditory cortex.