

# Does Loss of Integrity of the Cingulum Bundle Link Amyloid- $\beta$ Accumulation and Neurodegeneration in Alzheimer's Disease?

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## Abstract.

**Background:** Alzheimer's disease is characterized by the accumulation of amyloid- $\beta$  ( $A\beta$ ) into plaques, aggregation of tau into neurofibrillary tangles, and neurodegenerative processes including atrophy. However, there is a poorly understood spatial discordance between initial  $A\beta$  deposition and local neurodegeneration.

**Objective:** Here, we test the hypothesis that the cingulum bundle links  $A\beta$  deposition in the cingulate cortex to medial temporal lobe (MTL) atrophy.

**Methods:** 21 participants with mild cognitive impairment (MCI) from the UMC Utrecht memory clinic (UMCU, discovery sample) and 37 participants with MCI from Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI, replication sample) with available  $A\beta$ -PET scan, T1-weighted and diffusion-weighted MRI were included.  $A\beta$  load of the cingulate cortex was measured by the standardized uptake value ratio (SUVR), white matter integrity of the cingulum bundle was assessed by mean diffusivity and atrophy of the MTL by normalized MTL volume. Relationships were tested with linear mixed models, to accommodate multiple measures for each participant.

**Results:** We found at most a weak association between cingulate  $A\beta$  and MTL volume (added  $R^2 < 0.06$ ), primarily for the posterior hippocampus. In neither sample, white matter integrity of the cingulum bundle was associated with cingulate  $A\beta$  or MTL volume (added  $R^2 < 0.01$ ). Various sensitivity analyses ( $A\beta$ -positive individuals only, posterior cingulate SUVR, MTL sub region volume) provided similar results.

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<sup>1</sup>Data used in preparation of this article were obtained from the Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI) database (<https://adni.loni.usc.edu/>). As such, the investigators

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within the ADNI contributed to the design and implementation of ADNI and/or provided data but did not participate in analysis or writing of this report. A complete listing of ADNI investigators can be found at: [https://adni.loni.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/how\\_to\\_apply/ADNI\\_Acknowledgement\\_List.pdf](https://adni.loni.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/how_to_apply/ADNI_Acknowledgement_List.pdf)

**Conclusion:** These findings, consistent in two independent cohorts, do not support our hypothesis that loss of white matter integrity of the cingulum is a connecting factor between cingulate gyrus A $\beta$  deposition and MTL atrophy.

Keywords: Alzheimer's disease, amyloid- $\beta$ , diffusion tensor imaging, medial temporal lobe, neurodegeneration, PET, white matter integrity

## INTRODUCTION

Alzheimer's disease (AD) is characterized by the accumulation of amyloid- $\beta$  (A $\beta$ ) into plaques, aggregation of tau into neurofibrillary tangles, and neurodegenerative processes like atrophy [1]. However, there is a notable spatial discordance between typical initial locations of A $\beta$  deposition and neurodegenerative processes. Whereas A $\beta$  deposition typically starts in the precuneus, medial orbitofrontal cortex, and the cingulate cortex [2, 3], the aggregation of tau and atrophy mostly starts in the medial temporal lobe (MTL) [4–6]. Additionally, while A $\beta$  plaques are known to gradually spread throughout the brain, A $\beta$ -PET studies have found relatively little involvement of A $\beta$  in the MTL compared to neocortical regions [7–9]. This spatial discordance between A $\beta$  deposition and neurodegeneration in the MTL in AD is poorly understood [10]. In addition, there is a largely unexplained temporal discordance, as A $\beta$  deposition precedes neurodegenerative processes by a decade [11, 12].

A hypothesis in the AD field is that A $\beta$  deposition and distant neurodegeneration might be interconnected through the functional and structural architecture of the brain [13]. If these two processes are indeed connected via the structural connections of the brain, i.e., the white matter tracts, the cingulum bundle is of particular interest, because it connects the typical starting locations of A $\beta$  deposition (i.e., the cingulate cortex) with that of neurodegenerative processes (the MTL, see Fig. 1). The proposed role of the cingulum bundle could be two-fold. First, the cingulum might serve as a conduit for pathology or signals, linking A $\beta$  deposition in the cingulate cortex to spread of tau and neurodegeneration from the MTL to the neocortex. Second, the tracts of the cingulum bundle might degenerate because of A $\beta$  deposition on one end of the bundle, which might increase vulnerability of the MTL on the other end of the bundle and thereby promote local tau aggregation [14–17]. The integrity of the white matter in the cingulum bundle has been shown to be affected in AD [18] and has

been implicated in A $\beta$ -facilitated tau spread from the MTL to the posterior cingulate cortex [19].

In the current study, we explore the hypothesis that the cingulum bundle links A $\beta$  deposition in the cingulate cortex to neurodegeneration in the MTL. We tested this hypothesis in early symptomatic disease stages, i.e., patients with mild cognitive impairment (MCI), by assessing whether the relationship between white matter integrity of the cingulum bundle and pathology at either end of the bundle (i.e., A $\beta$  in the cingulate cortex and atrophy in the MTL) is stronger than the relationship between the two pathologies itself.

## METHODS

### *Participants*

#### *UMCU*

21 participants from the ABIDE study [20], recruited at the memory clinic of the UMC Utrecht (UMCU), were included. All participants underwent a one-day memory clinic evaluation including a physical examination, an interview, brain MRI and neuropsychological assessment. For the present study we selected participants with a diagnosis of MCI, available A $\beta$  [ $^{18}$ F]-florbetaben PET scan, diffusion MRI scan, and 3D-T1-weighted MRI scan. Clinical diagnosis was established at a multidisciplinary consensus meeting after the one-day memory clinic evaluation. MCI was defined as complaints or deterioration from prior functioning and objective evidence of impairment in at least one cognitive domain. Furthermore, daily living activities had to be normal or mildly impaired [21, 22].

#### *ADNI*

As a replication sample, we included 37 participants from the multicentric Alzheimer's Disease Neuroimaging Initiative (ADNI, phase 3, downloaded August 2019 at <https://adni.loni.usc.edu>). We selected participants with a diagnosis of MCI who had an available A $\beta$  [ $^{18}$ F]-florbetapir PET, available

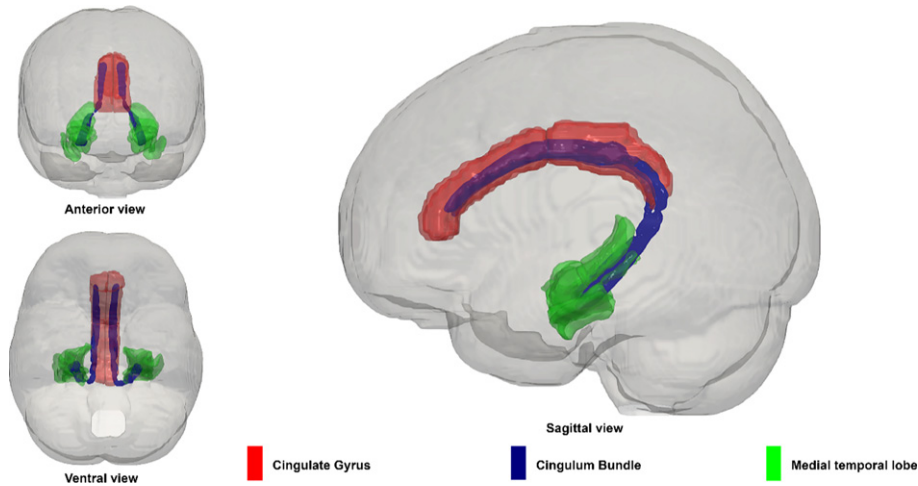


Fig. 1. Spatial overview of ROIs. A spatial overview of the cingulate gyrus (in red), the cingulum bundle (in blue) and the medial temporal lobe (in green) in anterior, ventral, and sagittal view.

diffusion MRI scan and available T1-weighted MRI (flowchart of the selection of participants can be found in Supplementary Figure 1). The MRI and PET scan had to be acquired with a maximum of 1 year apart. As diffusion measures are impacted by factors related to scanner and acquisition protocols [23–25], we selected participants from any center in which MRI was obtained on a Siemens scanner with a harmonized diffusion protocol. MCI diagnosis was based on the visit closest to the MRI scan. ADNI criteria for the diagnosis of MCI can be found on the website (<https://adni.loni.usc.edu>) and have been previously reported [26].

### Neuroimaging

#### Amyloid PET

For the UMCU sample, Amyloid PET scans were made on a Siemens Biograph 40 MCT. Participants were injected with a tracer dose of approximately  $300 \text{ MBq} \pm 20\%$  [ $^{18}\text{F}$ ]-florbetaben (Neuraceq<sup>TM</sup>). The image acquisition window extended from 90 to 110 min ( $4 \times 5$ -min frames) after dose injection. Detailed information on acquisition and processing can be found in the Supplementary Methods. To obtain A $\beta$  load for each participant, we first calculated the global cortical standardized uptake value ratio (SUVR) based on the volumes and the standardized uptake value (SUV) of all cortical ROIs with cerebellar gray matter as the reference tissue. For the primary analyses we used a composite score of the cingulate cortex (Cingulate SUVR) based on the

Hammers atlas [27]. This composite consisted of the SUVR of the anterior cingulate and the posterior cingulate. In a sensitivity analysis, we've also assessed the SUVR of only the posterior cingulate.

For the ADNI sample, participants were injected with  $370 \text{ MBq} \pm 10\%$  [ $^{18}\text{F}$ ]-Florbetapir. Images were acquired 50 to 70 min ( $4 \times 5$ -min frames) after dose injection. Further details on acquisition and processing of [ $^{18}\text{F}$ ]-Florbetapir PET have been described elsewhere and can be found on the website [28] (<https://adni.loni.usc.edu>). As a global measure of A $\beta$  load, we used the neocortical composite SUVR that comprises an average of frontal, cingulate, lateral-parietal, and lateral temporal gray matter regions-of-interest, using whole cerebellum as the reference region. For the primary analyses, we used the composite score of the cingulate regions (Cingulate SUVR) based on the Desikan-Killiany atlas [29] which consisted of the caudal anterior cingulate, isthmus cingulate, posterior cingulate and rostral anterior cingulate.

#### MRI acquisition

For the UMCU sample, brain MRI data was acquired using a Philips 3 T scanner (Achieva, Philips, Best, the Netherlands) with a standardized MRI protocol that included a 3D-T1 weighted sequence (192 continuous slices, voxel size:  $1 \times 1 \times 1 \text{ mm}^3$ , repetition time (TR)/echo time (TE): 7.9/4.5 ms, flip angle of  $8^\circ$ ) and a diffusion-weighted sequence (single-shot echo EPI, 48 contiguous slices, voxel size  $1.72 \times 1.72 \times 2.50 \text{ mm}^3$ , TR/TE

6600/73 ms, 45 gradient directions with a b-value of 1200 s/mm<sup>2</sup> and one with a b-value of 0 s/mm<sup>2</sup> (number of signal averages = 3)).

For the ADNI sample, brain MRI data for participants included in this study was acquired using a Siemens 3 T scanner (Siemens Healthineers, Erlangen, Germany). The standardized MRI protocol included an MPRAGE (170 sagittal slices, voxel size of 1 × 1 × 1 mm<sup>3</sup>, TR/TE/Inversion time (TI): 2.98/2300/900 ms, flip angle of 9°) and a diffusion-weighted sequence (voxel size 2 × 2 × 2 mm<sup>3</sup>, TR/TE: 7200/56, 41 gradient directions with a b-value of 1000 s/mm<sup>2</sup> and five with a b-value of 0 s/mm<sup>2</sup>).

#### *Diffusion preprocessing and tractography*

For both the UMCU and ADNI study samples, the diffusion-weighted data was processed with ExploreDTI (version 4.8.6; <https://www.exploredti.com/>) [30] running on MATLAB R2018a (MATLAB and Statistics Toolbox Release 2014b, The MathWorks, Inc., Natick, Massachusetts, United States). Preprocessing of the data included correction for subject motion, eddy current and susceptibility artefacts, including rotation of the B-matrix prior to the estimation of the diffusion tensor [30–32]. The diffusion tensors were computed using robust estimators [31] followed by whole-brain tractography. Fiber tracts were reconstructed by starting seed points uniformly throughout the data at 2 mm isotropic resolution with a step size of 1 mm. Each streamline was propagated using integration over fiber orientation distributions. Streamlines were guided by fiber orientations inferred using constrained spherical deconvolution with a maximum harmonic order (*l*-max) of 6. This method allows for the reconstruction of more complex pathways, such as crossing fibers [33]. Streamlines were terminated when they entered a voxel with fiber orientation distributions <0.1 or when the deflection angle between two successive steps was >45°.

Following preprocessing and tractography, we manually reconstructed the superior part and the parahippocampal part of the cingulum bundle per hemisphere in each participant. For the reconstruction of the tracts we used an earlier described multiple region of interest (ROI) approach [34, 35]. In short, ROIs for tract selection and tract exclusion were manually drawn on color coded fiber orientation maps in native space. ROI placement was based on previously defined anatomical landmarks to reduce subjectivity in fiber tracking [36]. Low inter- and intra-rater variability with this method has been demonstrated in

previous studies [37, 38]. For the reconstructed cingulum bundles, mean diffusivity (MD) was determined for the primary analysis. As a sensitivity analysis, we also performed an along tract analysis. Along tract analysis allows to assess multiple data points throughout the bundle rather than only the mean of the entire bundle, giving a higher sensitivity to subtle changes [39]. Along with the tract analysis, we assessed 8 different data points along the reconstructed cingulum bundles (4 for the superior part and 4 for the parahippocampal part) and determined MD for each of these data points per hemisphere, per subject.

#### *Medial temporal lobe volume*

MTL volume was determined for each participant by using the Automatic Segmentation of Hippocampal Subfields (ASHS) software package. More specifically we used the atlas for the T1-weighted MRI [40, 41]. ASHS automatically segments anterior and posterior hippocampus as well as MTL cortical sub regions for both hemispheres. All segmentation results were visually inspected, manual edits were not needed. Following visual inspection, we combined the volumes of the anterior hippocampus, posterior hippocampus, entorhinal cortex, Brodmann area 35 and 36 (perirhinal cortex) and the parahippocampal cortex to obtain MTL volume. MTL volume was normalized by the intracranial volume for each participant. For the UMCU sample intracranial volume was obtained by probabilistic segmentations using MeVisLab (MeVis Medical Solutions AG, Bremen, Germany). For the ADNI sample, intracranial volume was obtained by segmentations using the Computational Anatomical Toolbox (CAT) 12 toolbox (version R1073, C. Gaser, Structural Brain Mapping Group, Jena University Hospital, Jena, Germany) for SPM version 12.

#### *Statistical analysis*

All statistical analyses were performed in R (version 3.5.1) [42] and statistical significance level was set at  $\alpha = 0.05$ . All associations were tested with linear mixed models. Linear mixed models were used (using the “lme4” package; [43]) because they allow for both within- and between-subject factors, thus accommodating the four measurements of the cingulum bundle for each subject (left superior, right superior, left parahippocampal and right parahippocampal), two measurements for both cingulate SUVR and MTL (left and right), as well as considering between-subjects factors such as age and sex.

Table 1  
Participant characteristics

	UMCU ( $n = 21$ )	ADNI ( $n = 37$ )
Age, y	75.9 $\pm$ 6.5	75.6 $\pm$ 7.9
Female sex	8 (38)	15 (41)
MMSE	26 [3.5] (21–29)	27 [2] (23–30)
A $\beta$ -positive	14 (67)	22 (59)
[ <sup>18</sup> F]-florbetaben global SUVR	1.49 [0.3] (1.17–2.34)	NA
[ <sup>18</sup> F]-florbetaben cingulate SUVR	1.68 [0.45] (1.26–2.47)	NA
[ <sup>18</sup> F]-florbetapir global SUVR	NA	1.29 [0.57] (0.86–2.28)
[ <sup>18</sup> F]-florbetapir cingulate SUVR	NA	1.35 [0.54] (0.92–2.31)
ICV in ml	1445 [191] (1101–1645)	1482 [217] (1067–1774)
TBV, % of ICV	68.7 [4, 9] (62.5–73.3)	72.1 (6.7) (63.5–82.7)
MTL volume, % of ICV	0.89 [0.13] (0.75–1.11)	0.96 [0.17] (0.66–1.22)
MD Superior Cingulum bundle $10^{-4}$ mm <sup>2</sup> /s	7.61 [0.41] (7.22–9.07)	7.77 [0.31] (7.2–9.1)
MD Hippocampal Cingulum bundle $10^{-4}$ mm <sup>2</sup> /s	10.1 [1.77] (7.9–12.6)	9.34 [1.38] (7.7–11.9)

<sup>18</sup>F, fluorine-18; A $\beta$ , amyloid- $\beta$ ; ICV, intracranial volume; MD, mean diffusivity; mm, millimeter; MMSE, Mini-Mental State Exam; MTL, medial temporal lobe; NA, not applicable; SUVR, standardized uptake value ratio; TBV, total brain volume. Data is presented as mean  $\pm$  standard deviation,  $n$  (%) and median [interquartile range] (min – max).

The association between Cingulate SUVR and MTL volume was tested with a model that included Cingulate SUVR, hemisphere (left/right), age, and sex. The relationship between Cingulate SUVR and Cingulum MD was tested with a model that included MD of the cingulum, location (superior or parahippocampal), hemisphere, age, and sex. For the association between MTL volume and cingulum MD we included MD of the cingulum, location, hemisphere, age, and sex. For these main analyses, we report the standardized fixed effect (B), the 95% confidence interval, the  $p$ -value, and explained variance ( $R^2$ ) of the model without and with the variable of interest.

We performed the following *post-hoc* sensitivity analyses (also with linear mixed models). First, all analyses were repeated in A $\beta$ -positive individuals only, to rule out that findings were confounded by patients without AD pathology. For A $\beta$  load we repeated the analysis with posterior cingulate cortex SUVR only, as this region is part of the posterior MTL network and might be more sensitive. For the integrity of the cingulum bundle we also ran a more fine-grained along tract analysis. For MTL volume, we zoomed in on specific sub regions of the structure as these might be more sensitive than the complete volume. We assessed 1) posterior hippocampus volume, as this is spatially close to the cingulate cortex; 2) entorhinal cortex volume as the cingulum bundle projects mostly on this structure; and 3) parahippocampal cortex as this region is part of the posterior MTL network, together with the posterior cingulate. All sensitivity analyses were done in a similar way as described in the preceding paragraph. All tests

were performed separately for the UMCU and ADNI sample.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the participants of both the UMCU and the ADNI sample.

### *Cingulate SUVR: MTL volume*

No association was found between Cingulate SUVR and MTL volume in both the UMCU sample (B(CI):  $-0.27$  ( $-0.63 - 0.09$ ),  $p = 0.197$ ,  $R^2$  in model without and with SUVR 0.30 and 0.35, respectively) and the ADNI sample (B(CI) =  $-0.03$  ( $-0.34 - -0.29$ ),  $p = 0.88$ ,  $R^2$  in model without and with SUVR was 0.013 and 0.014, respectively), see Table 2 and Fig. 2A and 2B.

In a sensitivity analysis that assessed posterior hippocampus volume, an association was found for the ADNI sample (B(CI) =  $-0.38$  ( $-0.67 - -0.08$ ), *Bonferonni corrected*  $p = 0.045$ ), but not the UMCU sample (Supplementary Table 6). All other sensitivity analyses (in A $\beta$ -positive individuals, using posterior cingulate SUVR and using entorhinal cortex and parahippocampal volume) yielded results similar to the main analysis (Supplementary Tables 4–6).

### *Associations with cingulum MD*

The findings in Table 2 and Fig. 2C and 2D indicate that there was no association between Cingulate SUVR and Cingulum MD for either the UMCU

Table 2  
Main linear mixed model results

	UMCU $\beta$ (CI)	F (df)	<i>p</i>	ADNI $\beta$ (CI)	F (df)	<i>p</i>
Cing. SUVR – MTL vol.	-0.27 (-0.63 – 0.09)	1.84 (1, 13.4)	0.2	-0.03 (-0.34 – 0.29)	0.02 (1, 36.8)	0.88
MD – Cing. SUVR	0.01 (-0.06 – 0.07)	0.03 (1, 48.2)	0.86	-0.01 (-0.03 – 0.01)	1.33 (1, 108.2)	0.25
MD – MTL volume	0.06 (-0.16 – 0.28)	0.24 (1, 44.4)	0.62	-0.01 (-0.10 – 0.08)	0.06 (1, 111.3)	0.80

Shows the main results for the linear mixed models. Top row shows the results for the relationship between cingulate A $\beta$  and MTL volume, middle row the results for cingulum MD and cingulate A $\beta$  and the bottom row shows the results of the relationship between cingulum MD and MTL volume. Results are displayed as follows: the standardized fixed effects coefficients ( $\beta$ ) plus 95% confidence intervals, the F-tests with the degrees of freedom (df) and the *p*-value for both the UMCU and ADNI study samples.

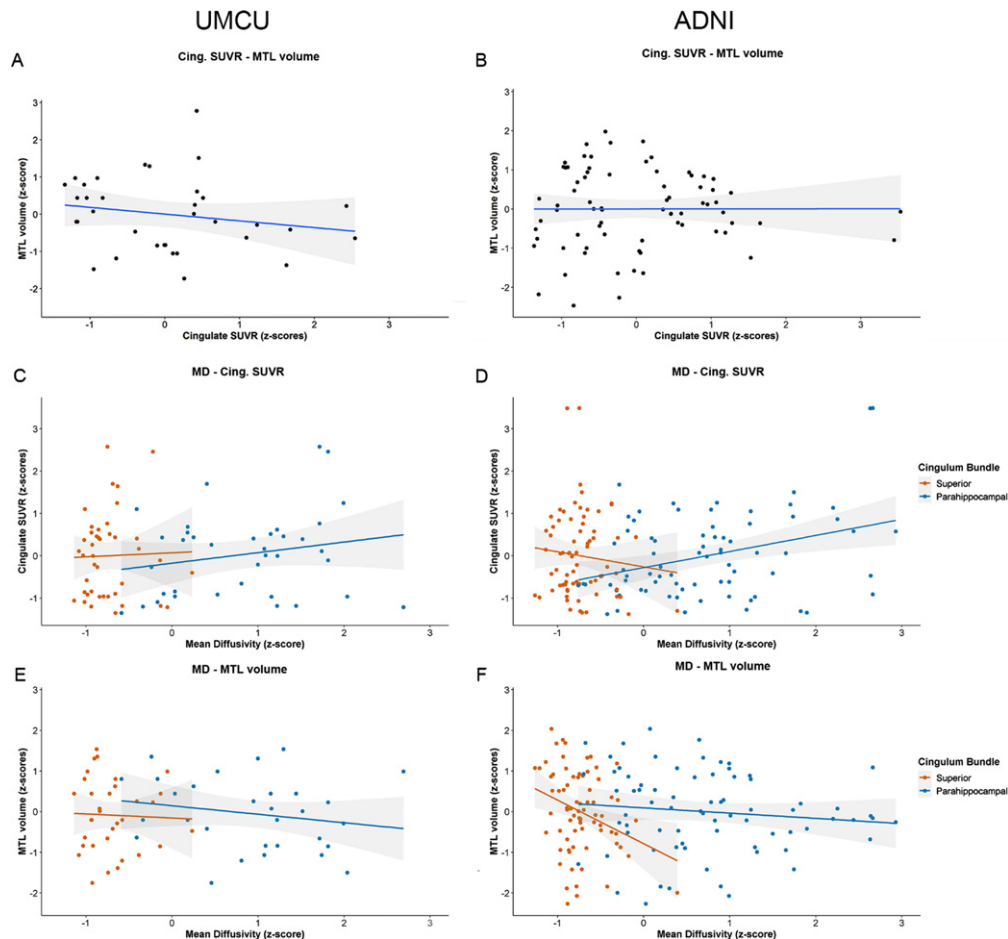


Fig. 2. Scatterplots of regression analyses. Scatterplots showing the association for UMCU (left) and ADNI (right) between Cingulate SUVR and MTL volume (A and B), for the association between Cingulum MD and Cingulate SUVR (C and D) as well as for the association between Cingulum MD and MTL volume. The legends on the outer right side of the figure refer to both panels.

( $B(CI)=0.006$  (-0.06 – 0.07),  $p=0.86$ ,  $R^2$  for model without or with SUVR was 0.0231 and 0.0232, respectively) or the ADNI sample ( $B(CI)=0.013$  (-0.03 – 0.01),  $p=0.25$ ,  $R^2$  for model without or with SUVR was 0.017 and 0.017, respectively). There were no significant associations for any of the covariates: age, sex, hemisphere, and location

(Supplementary Table 2). We performed sensitivity analyses in which we assessed the relationship between Cingulate SUVR and Cingulum MD in A $\beta$ -positive individuals and in which we used posterior cingulate SUVR rather than Cingulate SUVR but both yielded no difference in results (Supplementary Tables 4 and 5).

There was no relationship between MTL volume and cingulum MD in either the UMCU (B(CI)=0.06 (-0.16 – 0.28),  $p=0.62$ ,  $R^2$  for model without and with MTL volume was 0.29 and 0.29, respectively) or the ADNI sample (B(CI)=-0.01(-0.10 – 0.08),  $p=0.80$ ,  $R^2$  for model without and with MTL volume was 0.0077 and 0.0078, respectively), see Table 2 and Fig. 2E and 2F. There was no effect from the covariates (Supplementary Table 3). The sensitivity analysis in A $\beta$ -positive individuals gave similar results (Supplementary Table 4). When we tested the association using volumes of the sub regions of the MTL rather than the complete MTL, results remained non-significant (Supplementary Table 6).

As a sensitivity analysis on the white matter integrity of the cingulum, we performed a more fine-grained along-tracts analysis of 8 data points of the MD of the cingulum bundle. This analysis did not change the interpretation of the results (data not shown).

## DISCUSSION

We found at most a weak association between Cingulate A $\beta$  and MTL volume, primarily for the posterior hippocampus, in line with earlier findings [36, 37]. In neither sample, white matter integrity of the cingulum bundle was associated with Cingulate A $\beta$  on one end of the bundle or MTL volume at the other end. These consistent findings in two independent cohorts of patients with MCI do not support our hypothesis that loss of integrity of the cingulum bundle links A $\beta$  deposition in the cingulate cortex to neurodegeneration of structures in the MTL.

A $\beta$  deposition, tau aggregation and neurodegeneration are all characteristic features of AD, but A $\beta$  deposition has a striking spatiotemporal discordance with tau and neurodegeneration [17, 44]. The temporal discordance has been attributed to the sequence in which pathological processes take place. A $\beta$  accumulates first while neurodegeneration starts about a decade later [11, 45]. By the time that neurodegeneration starts, A $\beta$  deposition is believed to have reached a plateau level [44, 46], which in part explains the weak correlation between levels of biomarkers for these processes, as we also see in the current study. Here we focused on the discordant starting locations of A $\beta$  deposition compared to tau and neurodegenerative processes and zoomed in on loss of white matter integrity of the cingulum bundle as a connecting factor. The cingulum bundle was primarily chosen

because of its anatomical location, directly linking the cingulate gyrus and the MTL, but the bundle is also known to be affected in AD [18]. Microstructural changes in the cingulum bundle, specifically in the parahippocampal cingulum, are well established in MCI and AD [18, 47, 48]. Mito et al. [48] showed that the posterior cingulum bundle was 1 of 2 bundles affected in patients with MCI when compared to healthy controls. The integrity of the cingulum bundle has also been shown to predict tau deposition in the posterior cingulate cortex in A $\beta$  positive individuals from the MTL to the posterior cingulate cortex [19].

This study did not find that A $\beta$  deposition was linked to atrophy in the MTL via loss of integrity of the cingulum bundle. For the primary analysis we deliberately looked at the cingulate cortex and the complete MTL. It could, however, be argued that looking at these ROIs in closer detail would reveal more subtle relationships. Nevertheless, the *post hoc* sensitivity analyses that we performed did not show such an effect, with the exception of the association between cingulate A $\beta$  and posterior hippocampal volume. Our findings do not preclude involvement of white matter tracts in the dissemination of AD disease processes across the brain. A $\beta$  in the neocortex might facilitate tau spread via the white matter tracts, without the tracts itself being damaged in that process [16]. A hint towards such a mechanism can be found in functional connectivity studies. It has been established in multiple studies that the default mode network, which shows reduced connectivity in AD, shows a large overlap with A $\beta$  deposition patterns [49, 50]. Furthermore, network analysis has shown that the level of connectivity to an initially affected area is a more important factor for vulnerability to A $\beta$  deposition than proximity to such an affected area [51–53].

The main strength of our study is that we performed a hypothesis-driven study in two independent cohorts of patients with MCI with high quality MRI and PET data. We used a state-of-the-art diffusion imaging analysis pipeline which included modern preprocessing techniques. One important aspect of diffusion MRI is that it is susceptible for scanner influences. For ADNI, a multicenter study, we tried to limit scanner influences on the diffusion measures by only selecting MRIs obtained on a Siemens scanner with a harmonized protocol. However, they were still obtained on different (types of) scanners which might have influenced our diffusion measures. Furthermore, the voxels of the UMCU diffusion scan were slightly

anisotropic, which might have negatively influenced tractography results. However, we found very similar results in the ADNI cohort for which the diffusion scan was isotropic.

Another limitation is that our study design did not include controls, meaning that we could not establish if the white matter integrity of the cingulum was indeed affected in patients, as would be expected based on the literature [48, 54]. However, when we compared whole white matter MD of the MCI patients from the UMCU to the MD of a healthy control group ( $n = 47$ ) from one of our previous studies [55], MD was, as expected, significantly increased in the patient group (mean  $\pm$  sd ( $\times 10^{-4}$ ) patients:  $8.21 \pm 0.53$ ; mean  $\pm$  sd ( $\times 10^{-4}$ ) controls:  $7.81 \pm 0.31$ ). Furthermore, we assessed an MCI population and the lack of associations of both MTL atrophy and white matter integrity with A $\beta$  deposition might be because of a plateau effect of this latter biomarker. However, the association between A $\beta$  markers and atrophy is known to be inconsistent, also in early stages of the disease [56, 57] as is the association of A $\beta$  markers with white matter integrity [58–60]. Another limitation is that we could only assess A $\beta$ -PET as AD biomarker. Tau, especially in the entorhinal cortex, might have been valuable but this was not available for the UMCU sample. Lastly, in both cohorts sample sizes were modest, which affects statistical power. However, the results were very consistent across cohorts and point estimates for the tested associations were close to zero, indicating that the null finding is unlikely to be due to low power alone. Furthermore, future studies could use Bayesian models to exclude even small effects.

In conclusion, our results do not support the hypothesis that loss of integrity of the white matter is a connecting factor between A $\beta$  deposition in the cingulate gyrus and local neurodegeneration in the MTL. The hypothesis on involvement of the white matter tracts in the dissemination of AD disease processes should be further explored in future studies with a larger group of A $\beta$ -positive individuals.

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## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

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