Role of T-type calcium channels in myogenic tone of skeletal muscle resistance arteries

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VanBavel, Ed, Oana Sorop, Ditte Andeasen, Martin Pfaffendorf, and Boye L. Jensen. Role of T-type calcium channels in myogenic tone of skeletal muscle resistance arteries. Am J Physiol Heart Circ Physiol 283: H2239–H2243, 2002.—T-type calcium channels may be involved in the maintenance of myogenic tone. We tested their role in isolated rat cremaster arterioles obtained after CO2 anesthesia and maintenance of myogenic tone. We tested their role in isolated rat cremaster arterioles obtained after CO2 anesthesia and maintenance of myogenic tone. We tested their role in isolated rat cremaster arterioles obtained after CO2 anesthesia and maintenance of myogenic tone. We tested their role in isolated rat cremaster arterioles obtained after CO2 anesthesia and maintenance of myogenic tone. We tested their role in isolated rat cremaster arterioles obtained after CO2 anesthesia and maintenance of myogenic tone. We tested their role in isolated rat cremaster arterioles obtained after CO2 anesthesia and maintenance of myogenic tone.

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IN RESPONSE TO PRESSURE, arterioles and small resistance arteries generally develop vasoconstriction in the absence of any extrinsic agonists. This myogenic tone becomes more dominant in smaller vessels (4) and is thought to play a key role in the local control of tissue perfusion. The mechanisms responsible for myogenic tone have been the subject of ongoing studies. It is now well established that myogenic tone is independent of the endothelium in most vascular beds examined (17), even though endothelial products are the primary modulators of myogenic tone. This tone is associated with a rather modest but necessary smooth muscle cell (SMC) depolarization (28) and rise of intracellular calcium (25, 31) in combination with a pressure-induced increase in calcium sensitivity of the contractile filaments (25).

Pharmaceutical evidence indicates that L-type voltage-activated calcium (CaV) channels are significantly involved in pressure-induced calcium influx and tone in several resistance vessels (5, 27). However, steady-state open probability of these channels is quite low at membrane potentials frequently found under basal conditions (−60 to −40 mV at physiological pressures (5, 24)). The activation range of the smooth muscle L-type channel CaV1.2 may be shifted by regulation (11), and only a small calcium influx might be needed to maintain an elevated intracellular concentration (19). Alternatively, low-voltage-activated T-type calcium channels may be involved in the calcium influx associated with myogenic tone. These channels activate at more negative potentials and may only partially inactivate at membrane potentials associated with myogenic tone. Two recent studies have indeed shown that mibebradil, a T-type channel antagonist, inhibits myogenic tone in rat cerebral and cremaster vessels at concentrations (IC50 70 and 220 nM) that have been claimed to be specific for T-type over L-type calcium channels (15, 22).

Expression of recently cloned calcium channels in heterologous cell systems has established the existence of three pore-forming channel subunits with T-type current characteristics (activation at low voltages and rapid inactivation, sensitivity to mibebradil and nickel): CaV3.1, CaV3.2, and CaV3.3 (previously known as CaV1.1G, CaV1.2, and CaV1.3 (6, 20). mRNA for CaV3.1 and CaV3.2 and functional involvement in contraction have now been demonstrated in renal afferent and juxtamedullary efferent arterioles (10). mRNA for T-type calcium channels was also found in rat mesenteric arterioles of ~30.

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μm in diameter (8), whereas the L-type channel CaV1.2 was absent, and these arterioles also did not constrict to high potassium.

The above information supports a widespread distribution of T-type channel expression in vascular resistance segments and a role for T-type calcium channels in arteriolar function. The purpose of this paper was to investigate T-type channel expression in skeletal muscle resistance vessels and to further explore whether T-type channels are involved in the maintenance of myogenic tone. To address these issues, rat cremaster muscle arterioles were cannulated in vitro, and the sensitivity of myogenic tone to pharmacological antagonists of L- and T-type channels was elucidated. Sensitivity to antagonists was compared in two situations with different membrane potentials: at physiological perfusion pressure and at a low perfusion pressure where the same level of tone was achieved by the addition of potassium to depolarize the membrane potential.

METHODS

Isolation of resistance arteries. Male Wistar rats weighing 250–300 g were briefly anesthetized by CO2 gas and decapitated. The left and right cremaster muscles were carefully isolated, suspended in buffer [containing (in mM) 130 NaCl, 5 KCl, 2 CaCl2, 10 n-glucose, 20 sucrose, and 10 HEPES; pH 7.4] and mounted in dissection chambers for isolation of vessels at 4°C. For molecular biology, first- and second-order vessel segments with a total length of ~1 cm were isolated from each cremaster. For pharmacology on cannulated vessels, unbranched segments of first-order arterioles were isolated of ~3 mm in length.

RNA isolation, RT-PCR, and Southern blotting. First- and second-order arterioles were cut in ~400-μm pieces and directly added to guanidinium-thiocyanate (4 mol/l) previously described (1, 2). For homogenization, the fragments were repeatedly triturated through syringes with decreasing dimensions ending with 25 gauge. Yeast tRNA (12 μg) was added as a carrier. Total RNA was extracted by phenol-chloroform extraction, precipitated with isopropanol, and repeatedly washed with 70% ethanol (2). RNA pellets were suspended in diethyl pyrocarbonate-treated water and used for cDNA synthesis as previously described in detail (1). RNA corresponding to 1 mm of vessel length was used for cDNA synthesis.

PCRs were performed with 18-mer oligonucleotides (Invitrogen) for rat T- and L-type CaV channels and β-actin as previously described (10). PCR was performed for 32 cycles (Mastercycler, Eppendorf). For a negative control, reverse transcription of total RNA was performed in the absence of reverse transcriptase and then amplified by PCR, and, in separate tubes, water was added instead of cDNA in PCR. For southern blotting, PCR products were separated by agarose gel electrophoresis and blotted to Zeta Probe GT membranes (Bio-Rad) using standard capillary blotting procedures as previously described (1). Hybridization was allowed overnight to a specific probe in vitro labeled with [α-35P]-dCTP; all procedures were according to Sambrook et al. (23). Autoradiography was performed for 2–4 h on Kodak Biomax MS film.

Pharmacological studies. Isolated cremaster muscle arterioles were cannulated on two glass micropipettes using previously reported techniques (25). Vessels were pressurized to 75 mmHg at 34°C, the in vivo temperature of the cremaster muscle, and allowed to develop myogenic tone. Cumulative concentration-response curves were then made for the effect of one of three calcium channel blockers on tone: verapamil, an L-type calcium channel blocker, the analog mibebradil, which is relatively selective for T-type channels, and nickel, which also relatively selectively blocks T-type channels. Only one blocker was used for each vessel. In separate experiments, the effect of these blockers was tested on vessels kept at 35 mmHg, resulting in a lack of myogenic tone, after the induction of preconstriction by 30 mM K+.

RESULTS

Expression of α2-units of calcium channels. RNA was extracted from cremaster muscle arterioles of three rats and analyzed along with RNA obtained from an aortic cell line (A7r5) and the rat cerebral cortex, which
L-type channel CaV1.2 mRNA was not found in one of the preparations (Fig. 1). The Southern blot assured expression and identity of the subunit mRNAs was also detected in the rat cerebral cortex using 50 ng total RNA as template for RT-PCR. Amplification products for T-type channels CaV3.1 and CaV3.2 were detected in all three cremaster vessel preparations by RT-PCR amplification products for T-type channels CaV3.1 and CaV3.2 were detected in all three cremaster vessel preparations by RT-PCR amplification products. Reverse transcription of carrier yeast tRNA followed by PCR for each subunit did also not result in detectable amplification products (Fig. 1, tRNA lane). Expression of all three subunit mRNAs was also detected in the rat aortic SMC line A7r5 and in RNA samples isolated from the rat cerebral cortex using 50 ng total RNA as template for RT-PCR. Amplification products were only obtained in the presence of reverse transcriptase and cDNA in the RT-PCR, confirming the mRNA origin of the amplification products. Reverse transcription of carrier yeast tRNA followed by PCR for each subunit did also not result in detectable amplification products (Fig. 1, tRNA lane).

Pharmacological studies. Nineteen vessels were studied in the myogenic tone group, having an average passive inner diameter of 145 ± 3 μm at 75 mmHg. When maintained at this pressure, the vessels developed myogenic tone, resulting in a reduction of the normalized inner diameter to 0.57 ± 0.03 (mean ± SE, n = 19). Myogenic tone was sensitive to verapamil, mibebradil, and nickel; concentration-response curves are indicated in Figs. 2–4. Log(IC50) values are indicated in Table 1. Fourteen slightly smaller vessels (passive inner diameter at 75 mmHg: 134 ± 3 μm, P < 0.05) were kept at 35 mmHg. The vessels remained passive at this diameter, probably due to myogenic inhibition of tone. A stable level of preconstriction was induced by 30 mM K+ resulting in a reduction of the normalized diameter to the same level as in the previous series: 0.54 ± 0.03 (P = not significant, basal versus K+). All three calcium channel blockers were able to inhibit the potassium-induced tone, as indicated by the concentration-response curves in Figs. 2–4 and the IC50 values in Table 1. A comparison of the inhibition of basal versus potassium-induced tone shows marked differences: both mibebradil and nickel were very potent inhibitors of basal but not of potassium-induced tone. Thus a 162-fold difference in IC50 was found for mibebradil, whereas the IC50 for nickel was 300-fold lower on myogenic tone compared with potassium-induced constriction. Verapamil, an L-type calcium channel blocker, 17-fold more potently blocked myogenic tone compared with potassium-induced tone (see Table 1).

Table 1. Effect of calcium channel blockers on myogenic tone and K+-induced constriction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blocker</th>
<th>Myogenic tone (75 mmHg)</th>
<th>K+ (30 mM) constriction (35 mmHg)</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verapamil</td>
<td>-6.63 ± 0.16 (n=5)</td>
<td>-5.40 ± 0.33 (n=4)</td>
<td>&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mibebradil</td>
<td>-7.31 ± 0.19 (n=9)</td>
<td>-5.10 ± 0.11 (n=5)</td>
<td>&lt;0.00001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nickel</td>
<td>-4.08 ± 0.18 (n=5)</td>
<td>-1.60 ± 0.49 (n=5)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results are means ± SE; n = no. of rats. Values are unitless log (IC50), where IC50 is expressed in molar. Significance was measured by unpaired t-tests.
pared with potassium-induced tone. While we appreciate that both blockers may also affect L-type calcium channels, the two decades higher potency on myogenic tone compared with potassium-induced constriction suggests specific actions in the current study. Together, these data point at a role for T-type calcium channels in the development and maintenance of myogenic tone.

Care should be taken in relating the expression of Cav3.1 and Cav3.2 at the messenger level to their possible role in cell function, because the applied RT-PCR was not quantitative and because messenger and protein levels may well diverge. Also, the RT-PCR was performed on the whole vascular wall. While there is no evidence for expression of voltage-dependent calcium channels in endothelial cells, and while it seems highly unlikely that the perivascular nerve endings contain any mRNA, we cannot fully exclude the possibility that part of the messenger signal we found for the T-type channels originated from other cells than SMCs. Immunohistochemical evidence could further substantiate expression and localization of these channels, but this awaits the further development of antibodies. We attempted to obtain electrophysiological evidence for these channels in SMCs isolated from cremaster arterioles. However, in our hands, the digestion protocols, which included papain, resulted in cells that had neither L- nor T-type currents and also did not contract to high potassium concentrations. The single study we are aware of that did successfully measure calcium currents in these specific cells (29) was not aimed at discriminating between both channels. In that study, using holding potentials of −80 mV, no clear calcium or barium currents were observed below −50 and −20 mV, respectively, arguing against functional involvement of T-type channels under those conditions. Further patch-clamp experiments will be required here. However, T-type calcium currents have been demonstrated in vascular smooth muscle cells of other sources (7, 21).

In our study, nickel blocked myogenic tone with a threshold concentration of ∼10 μM and an IC₅₀ of 0.1 nM. These values are very similar to the threshold and IC₅₀ reported for inhibition of peak current in expressed Cav3.1 channels, whereas Cav3.2 channels had a higher sensitivity for nickel (16). Nickel also blocks expressed Cav1.2 currents, but at a much higher concentration [<100 μM (30)]. Thus our data indicate that specifically Cav3.1 could be involved in the maintenance of myogenic tone, in accordance with the observed expression of this channel. The role of Cav3.2, which we also found to be expressed, remains to be elucidated.

Mibebradil has been put forward (3, 18) and challenged (22) as a relatively selective T-type calcium channel blocker. Mibebradil inhibited Ba²⁺ current through expressed Cav3.1 at a holding potential of −60 mV with an IC₅₀ at 0.12 μM (12), whereas the effects using calcium as the charge carrier were similar (14). Two recent studies addressed the effects of mibebradil on myogenic tone. Lam et al. (15) found mibebradil to inhibit myogenic tone at 60 mmHg with an IC₅₀ of 70 nM in rat middle cerebral arteries. Potocnik et al. (22) studied the effects of mibebradil on rat cremaster arterioles and observed inhibition of myogenic tone at 70 mmHg with an IC₅₀ of 0.22 μM. The current study on the same vessel type and perfusion at 75 mmHg found a similar IC₅₀ for mibebradil at 0.17 μM. Thus these studies find effects of mibebradil on myogenic tone that are, based on the electrophysiology of the cloned channel, consistent with an inhibition of Cav3.1. However, Potocnik et al. (22) argued that the effects of mibebradil on myogenic tone may not be carried through T-type calcium channels. In that study (22), mibebradil up to 10 μM did not lower the intracellular calcium concentration and failed to prevent the rise in calcium upon pressure steps and application of high potassium, even though the contractile response was inhibited. The authors suggested that mibebradil could have intracellular effects on calcium sensitivity rather than blockade of T-type calcium channels.

The clear difference in effects of mibebradil and nickel on pressure-induced versus potassium-induced tone could relate to the membrane potential. Alternatively, pressurization might directly affect the opening of the T-type calcium channels. Also, we cannot fully rule out effects of these blockers on the nonselective cation channels recently shown to be involved in pressure-induced depolarization (26). An inhibitory effect of both blockers on nonselective cation conductance has recently been demonstrated on visceral SMCs (13). Whether the difference in potency of verapamil on myogenic versus potassium-induced tone reflects direct modulation of the L-type calcium channels or other effects of this blocker remains to be established.

Whereas in our study the low potency of nickel and mibebradil on K⁺-induced contraction is in accordance with the involvement of L-type calcium channels, other studies do indicate a higher sensitivity of depolarization-induced arteriolar constriction to mibebradil and/or nickel (10, 22) also in the cremaster arterioles that we studied (22). The protocols, however, were different: we first established a stable potassium-induced contraction and then performed a cumulative concentration-response series of the blockers, whereas others tested the effect of a sudden switch to high potassium in the presence of varying concentrations of the blockers. Comparison of the above studies suggests that potassium-induced contraction could be initiated by calcium influx through T-type channels, whereas its maintenance requires L-type channels. Maintenance of myogenic tone, however, was shown here to depend on T-type calcium channels.

Gustafsson et al. (8) studied the contribution of L- and T-type calcium channels in local and conducted vasoconstriction of rat mesenteric arterioles of ∼30 μm in diameter. These authors found the constriction to topical norepinephrine and current stimulation to be fully insensitive to the L-type channel blockers nifedipine and nimodipine. Also, the L-type channel Cav1.2 was not expressed, and the arterioles did not contract to high concentrations of potassium. In contrast,
Cav3.1 and Cav3.2 were expressed, and nickel and mibebradil suppressed the local and conducted constrictions to norepinephrine and current injection. Possible side effects of the blockers on L-type currents can be excluded here because those channels were not expressed. Hansen et al. (9, 10) found expression of Cav1.2, Cav3.1, Cav3.2, and the P/Q-type Cav2.1 in rat afferent arterioles. Each of the calcium channel blockers calceisipetine (specific for L-type channels), ω-agatoxin IVA (P/Q-type blocker), mibebradil, and nickel fully inhibited contraction of cannulated rabbit afferent arterioles to 100 mM K⁺ at concentrations believed to reflect specific actions. Interestingly, T- and L-type calcium channels were not found in cortical effenter arterioles. Those studies point at a highly regulated differential distribution of Cav channels along the renal vasculature and at the significance of T-type calcium channels. The current study and those of Hansen et al. (9, 10) suggest that a cooperative action of multiple types of calcium channels is required for the maintenance of constriction. It is not clear how this correlates with a simple parallel arrangement of the channels in the cell membrane. Intracellular calcium gradients or heterogeneity within the SMC population could provide explanations.

In conclusion, T-type calcium channels were expressed at the messenger level in rat cremaster arterioles. Pharmacological evidence supports their contribution to myogenic tone.

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