Interaction of neuronal nitric oxide synthase with alpha1-adrenergic receptor subtypes in transfected HEK-293 cells

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Abstract

Background: The C-terminal four amino acids (GEEV) of human α1A-adrenergic receptors (ARs) have been reported to interact with the PDZ domain of neuronal nitric oxide synthase (nNOS) in a yeast two-hybrid system. The other two α1-AR subtypes have no sequence homology in this region, raising the possibility of subtype-specific protein-protein interactions.

Results: We used co-immunoprecipitation and functional approaches with epitope-tagged α1-ARs to examine this interaction and the importance of the C-terminal tail. Following co-transfection of HEK-293 cells with hexahistidine/Flag (HF)-tagged α1A-ARs and nNOS, membranes were solubilized and immunoprecipitated with anti-FLAG affinity resin or anti-nNOS antibodies. Immunoprecipitation of HFα1A-ARs resulted in co-immunoprecipitation of nNOS and vice versa, confirming that these proteins interact. However, nNOS also co-immunoprecipitated with HFα1B- and HFα1D-ARs, suggesting that the interaction is not specific to the α1A subtype. In addition, nNOS co-immunoprecipitated with each of the three HFα1-AR subtypes which had been C-terminally truncated, suggesting that this interaction does not require the C-tails; and with Flag-tagged β1- and β2-ARs. Treatment of PC12 cells expressing HFα1A-ARs with an inhibitor of nitric oxide formation did not alter norepinephrine-mediated activation of mitogen activated protein kinases, suggesting nNOS is not involved in this response.

Conclusions: These results show that nNOS does interact with full-length α1A-ARs, but that this interaction is not subtype-specific and does not require the C-terminal tail, raising questions about its functional significance.

Background

α1-Adrenergic receptors (ARs) are G protein-coupled receptors that mediate some of the actions of norepinephrine and epinephrine. Three human α1-AR subtypes have been cloned and named α1A, α1B and α1D-ARs[1]. These receptors regulate several important central and peripheral processes, such as neuronal excitability, vascular and nonvascular smooth muscle contraction, and cellular growth and differentiation. The three α1-AR subtypes are structurally and pharmacologically distinct, but all couple through Gq/11 to cause activation of apparently similar intracellular signaling pathways.

The last four amino acids of the intracellular C-tail of the α1A-AR, GEEV, matches the motif G(D/E)XV shown previously to interact with the class III PDZ domain of neuron-
al nitric oxide synthase (nNOS). Experiments using the yeast two-hybrid system showed previously that a protein corresponding to the last 114 amino acids of the rat α1A-AR (previously referred to as α1C-AR) interacted strongly with the PDZ domain of nNOS[2]. Since the corresponding amino acids at the C-terminus of α1B (PGQF) and α1D-ARs (ETDI) would not be predicted to interact with this PDZ domain, an interaction between α1A-ARs and nNOS could represent an interaction unique to this subtype.

PDZ domains are protein-binding modules involved in assembly of signaling complexes and subcellular protein targeting[3]. For example, NMDA receptors in cultured cortical neurons associate with nNOS through PSD-95, a protein containing three PDZ domains[4]. Consequently, NMDA receptor activation increases nitric oxide production and neurotoxicity; while suppression of PSD-95 expression inhibits these responses. These results suggest that the PDZ domains of PSD-95 may facilitate the assembly of signaling complexes involving both NMDA receptors and nNOS, and the increases in intracellular Ca2+ caused by NMDA receptor activation may facilitate nNOS activation.

Since α1A-AR activation also increases intracellular Ca2+, we studied the interaction between this receptor and nNOS. We wanted to determine whether full-length α1A-ARs interact with full-length nNOS, whether the interaction is subtype-specific, and whether it involves the GEEV motif in the C-terminal tail. We co-expressed epitope-tagged full length or C-terminally truncated α1-ARs with nNOS in HEK-293 cells and examined the ability of anti-Flag and anti-nNOS antibodies to immunoprecipitate both proteins. We found that nNOS does interact with full-length α1A-ARs, but that it also interacts with other α1-AR subtypes and β-ARs. In addition, the interaction does not require the C-terminal tail, confirming that it is not specific to the GEEV motif.

**Results**

**Co-immunoprecipitation of nNOS with HFα1A-ARs**

To study the interaction between α1A-ARs and nNOS, HEK-293 cells were transfected with rat nNOS and selected with geneticin (400 μg/ml). Western blots using an anti-nNOS antibody showed a strong immunoreactive band of ~170 kDa corresponding to nNOS in stably transfected cells as expected, but little or no signal in untransfected cells (data not shown). Expression of nNOS was similar to that observed with equal amounts of rat brain membrane protein run in parallel, suggesting similar expression levels. HEK-293 cells stably transfected with nNOS were co-transfected with the cDNA encoding HFα1A-ARs. Expression levels of transiently transfected α1-ARs in these cells ranged from 100–500 fmol/mg protein, also similar to levels observed in rat brain. Cells were then solubilized, immunoprecipitated with anti-Flag M2 affinity resin, eluted, and blotted with anti-Flag (Fig. 1A) or anti-nNOS antibodies (Fig. 1B). Western blots of anti-Flag immunoprecipitates showed that HFα1A-ARs migrated as monomers of ~50 kDa (Fig. 1), and also appeared as dimers and trimers, as reported previously[5]. Immunoprecipitation of HFα1A-ARs with anti-Flag affinity resin resulted in co-immunoprecipitation of nNOS, as revealed by the 170 kDa band detected in immunoblots using anti-nNOS antibody (Fig. 1B). Note that nNOS immunoreactivity was not present in anti-Flag affinity resin immunoprecipitates from solubilized HEK-293 cells not transfected with HFα1A-ARs (Fig. 1B), showing that co-immunoprecipitation of nNOS requires presence of the tagged receptor construct.

**Co-immunoprecipitation of nNOS with HFα1B- and HFα1D-ARs**

To determine whether the interaction between nNOS and α1A-ARs was subtype-specific, cells stably expressing nNOS were co-transfected with HFα1B or HFα1D-ARs, solubilized, immunoprecipitated with anti-Flag affinity resin, eluted, and blotted with anti-Flag (Fig. 2A) or anti-nNOS antibodies (Fig. 2B). Monomers of the HFα1B and
HF\(\alpha_{1D}\)-ARs migrated as bands of \(\approx 65\) and \(\approx 75\) kDa (Fig. 2A), and dimers and trimers were also detected. Surprisingly, nNOS was also co-immunoprecipitated from cells co-expressing nNOS and HF\(\alpha_{1D}\)-ARs (Flag-D/nNOS) or HEK-293 cells expressing only the HF-tagged \(\alpha_{1B}\)-AR subtypes (Flag-B, Flag-B/nNOS) (Fig. 2B), although the GEEV motif predicted to interact with nNOS is not present in either of these subtypes.

**Interaction of C-terminally truncated HF\(\alpha_{1A}\)-ARs with nNOS**

The role of the C-terminus of \(\alpha_{1A}\)-ARs in the interaction with nNOS was examined by truncation. Stop codons were introduced approximately 20 amino acids after the predicted 7th transmembrane domain, at a conserved glutamine (\(\alpha_{1A}\), Gln 344; \(\alpha_{1B}\), Gln 366) or an adjacent arginine (\(\alpha_{1D}\), Arg 418). Truncated HF\(\alpha_{1A}\)-ARs were transfected into HEK-293 cells stably expressing nNOS, and cells were solubilized, immunoprecipitated with anti-Flag M2 affinity resin, and blotted with anti-Flag (Fig. 3A) or anti-nNOS antibodies (Fig. 3B). The monomeric truncated receptors migrated with molecular masses \(\approx 25\)% lower than that of the full length receptors (Fig. 3A), and higher order oligomers were also apparent as observed with full-length receptors. Specific immunoreactivity to anti-nNOS antibody was also detected in these immunoprecipitates (Fig. 3B), showing that the C-terminal cytoplasmic tail of the HF\(\alpha_{1A}\)-ARs is not required for interaction.

**Co-immunoprecipitation of HF-tagged \(\alpha_{1A}\)-ARs with anti-nNOS antibody**

We also examined the ability of anti-nNOS antibodies to co-immunoprecipitate full length and truncated HF\(\alpha_{1A}\)-ARs. HEK-293 cells expressing nNOS were transfected with each receptor construct and harvested after 48–72 hr. Samples were solubilized, incubated with anti-nNOS antibody, immunoprecipitated with Protein A agarose, and blotted with anti-Flag antibody. This procedure resulted in a strong non-specific band migrating at \(\approx 50\) kDa (approximately the size of the HF\(\alpha_{1A}\)-AR), probably representing IgG heavy chains. For comparison, parallel samples were immunoprecipitated with anti-Flag affinity resin and loaded on the same gel. Fig. 4A shows that anti-nNOS antibodies caused co-immunoprecipitation of all three full length and truncated HF\(\alpha_{1A}\)-ARs. Note that neither protein A agarose alone, nor anti-nNOS antibody plus protein A agarose, caused immunoprecipitation of HF\(\alpha_{1A}\)-ARs in cells not expressing nNOS (data not shown). This indicates that HF\(\alpha_{1A}\)-ARs do not nonspecifically interact with anti-nNOS antibody and/or protein A agarose.

**Co-immunoprecipitation of nNOS with Flag-tagged \(\beta_{1}\)- and \(\beta_{2}\)-ARs**

To further examine the specificity of this interaction, HEK-293 cells stably expressing nNOS were co-transfected with Flag-tagged \(\beta_{1}\) or \(\beta_{2}\)-ARs, solubilized, immunoprecipit-
ed with anti-Flag affinity resin or anti-nNOS antibody plus Protein A agarose, and blotted with anti-Flag (Fig. 5A) or anti-nNOS antibodies (Fig. 5B). Fig. 5A shows that both Flag-tagged β₁ and β₂-ARs migrated as monomers (β₁ at ~70 kDa and β₂ at ~50 kDa) as well as oligomers (data not shown), and that immunoprecipitation of nNOS caused co-immunoprecipitation of both Flag-tagged β₁ or β₂-ARs. Fig. 5B shows that nNOS was also observed following immunoprecipitation with anti-Flag M2 affinity resin in cells transfected with either Flag-tagged β₁ and β₂-ARs.

**Effect of I-NAME on α₁A-AR-induced ERK activation in PC12 cells**

It is known that nitric oxide produced by nNOS is required for PC12 cell differentiation induced by nerve growth factor (NGF) and that treatment of PC12 cells with NGF induces nNOS expression[6]. Since α₁A-AR stimulation also activates ERKs and induces differentiation in PC12 cells stably transfected with this subtype[7], we investigated the effects of I-NAME, an inhibitor of NOS, on norepinephrine-induced ERK phosphorylation in PC12 cells stably transfected with HFreα₁A-ARs. Fig. 6 shows that treatment of HFreα₁A-PC12 cells with high concentrations of I-NAME did not block ERK phosphorylation induced by norepinephrine, or by UTP, EGF or NGF, suggesting...
that nitric oxide is not required for mitogenic signals in this cell line.

**Discussion**

We evaluated the specificity and functional importance of the reported interaction of the C-terminus of α1A-ARs with the PDZ domain of nNOS. Previous work using a yeast two hybrid assay showed that the C-terminal 114 amino acids of rat α1A-ARs (referred to by the previous name of α1IC-) strongly interacted with residues 1–111 of nNOS[2]. The bradykinin B2 receptor, also a G protein coupled receptor, has been shown to bind directly to the oxygenase domain of nNOS and form an inhibitory complex[8], and it has been proposed that nNOS is released and activated upon receptor stimulation. The domain of the bradykinin B2 receptor that interacts with nNOS is in the C-tail shortly after the predicted 7th transmembrane domain, and spatially similar but structurally dissimilar domains of the rat angiotensin AT1 receptor and human endothelin-1 ETB receptors have been proposed to block endothelial NOS (eNOS) activity, possibly through a similar mechanism[9]. Therefore we wanted to determine whether there was a specific interaction between full-length α1A-ARs and nNOS in intact cells.

Co-immunoprecipitation experiments showed that epitope-tagged α1A-ARs do interact with full-length nNOS when expressed together in HEK-293 cells. Immunoprecipitation of HFα1A-ARs from cells stably expressing nNOS caused co-immunoprecipitation of nNOS. Similarly, immunoprecipitation of nNOS caused co-immunoprecipitation of HFα1A-ARs. This interaction appeared to be specific, since nNOS was not immunoprecipitated by anti-Flag affinity resin in cells not transfected with tagged receptors, and tagged receptors were not immunoprecipitated by anti-nNOS antibody in cells not expressing nNOS.

These results support an interaction between nNOS and α1A-ARs, which could be due to the previously reported interaction of the receptor C-terminus and the PDZ domain of nNOS[2]. However, this hypothesis is weakened by the unexpected observation that nNOS also co-immunoprecipitates with both α1B and α1D-ARs. There is little or no homology between the C-terminal sequences of α1A, α1B and α1D-ARs, and neither α1B nor α1D-ARs contain the GEEV motif predicted to mediate the interaction between α1A-ARs and nNOS. However, nNOS was found to co-immunoprecipitate with both HFα1B- and HFα1D-ARs after co-expression in HEK-293 cells. These interactions could be observed by blotting for the tagged receptors after immunoprecipitation with anti-nNOS antibody, or by blotting for nNOS after immunoprecipitation of the tagged receptors with anti-Flag antibody. Direct comparison of α1A, α1B and α1D-ARs in the same experiment showed similar degrees of interactions of all three subtypes with nNOS (data not shown), further demonstrating that this interaction is not specific to the α1A subtype.

We examined the role of the C-terminal tail in this interaction by constructing receptors in which the C-terminus was truncated. Studies with HFα1-AR subtypes with short (~20 aa) C-terminal tails suggested that the C-terminal tails are not required for interaction with nNOS. Following transfection into nNOS-expressing cells, immunoprecipitation of all three C-terminally truncated HFα1-AR constructs caused co-immunoprecipitation of nNOS similar to that observed with full-length receptors. Although PDZ domains of some proteins, such as PSD-95 and syntrophin, can bind internal peptide sequences that fold as β-fingers and mimic canonical C-terminal peptides[10,11], there is very little homology between the intracellular loops of α1-AR subtypes, making it unlikely that there is a common internal amino acid sequence involved in interaction with nNOS.

Since we found nNOS to co-immunoprecipitate with all three α1-AR subtypes, we also determined whether it would directly associate with β-ARs. Flag-tagged β1 and β2-ARs were transfected into cells stably expressing nNOS, and after solubilization and immunoprecipitation with
anti-Flag M2 affinity resin we again found co-immunoprecipitation of nNOS. Since $\beta_1$ and $\beta_2$-ARs show no sequence homology to $\alpha_1$-AR subtypes in their intracellular domains, this further supports the conclusion that interaction with nNOS is not localized to discrete intracellular domains.

Conclusions
Our data suggest that full-length $\alpha_{1A}$-ARs do interact with nNOS; however this interaction is not subtype-specific since $\alpha_{1B}$- and $\alpha_{1D}$-ARs showed similar interactions. The interaction did not require the receptor C-terminus, and similar interactions were observed with $\beta_1$ and $\beta_2$-ARs. This data does not support a proposed specific interaction between the $\alpha_{1A}$-AR C-terminus and the nNOS PDZ domain suggested by studies with fusion proteins. Studies on $\alpha_{1A}$-ARs in transfected PC12 cells showed no role for nitric oxide in mitogenic signaling, also raising questions about the functional significance of this interaction.

Methods
Materials
HEK-293 cells were purchased from ATCC. PC12 cells were obtained from Cindy Miranti and Michael Greenberg (Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA). The cDNA encoding rat nNOS was from Dr. Thomas Michel (Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA), the human $\alpha_{1A}^\text{R}$-AR cDNA [12] from Dr. Gozoh Tsujimoto (National Children’s Hospital, Tokyo, Japan), the human $\alpha_{1B}$-AR cDNA [13] from Dr. Dianne Perez (Cleveland Clinic), and the human $\alpha_{1D}$-AR cDNA [14] was cloned in our lab. Materials were obtained from the following sources: Dulbecco’s modified Eagle’s medium (DMEM); L-NAME; norepinephrine ((-)-arotenol); streptomycin, penicillin, Flag peptide, anti-Flag M2 affinity resin, HRP-conjugated anti-Flag M2 antibody and goat anti-rabbit HRP-conjugated secondary antibodies (Sigma, St Louis, MO); genetin; n-Dodecyl-$\beta$-D-maltoside (Calbiochem); anti-nNOS rabbit polyclonal antibody, Protein A-agarose resin (Santa Cruz); rabbit polyclonal dual phospho-specific anti-ERK antibody, PNGase F (New England Biolabs); and ECL reagent (Amersham).

Cell culture
HEK-293 cells were propagated in Dulbecco’s Minimal Essential Medium with sodium pyruvate, 10% heat inactivated fetal bovine serum, 100 U/l streptomycin, and 100 U/l penicillin at 37°C in a humidified atmosphere with 5% CO2. Confluent plates were subcultured at a 1:3 ratio. PC12 cells were propagated in Dulbecco’s Minimal Essential Medium containing 4.5 g/l glucose, 1.4% glutamine, 20 mM Hepes, 100 U/l streptomycin, 100 U/l penicillin, 10% donor horse serum, and 5% fetal bovine serum. For measurement of ERK phosphorylation, 35 mm dishes of PC12 cells were seeded at a density of 600,000 cells/2 ml.

Transfections
Receptor coding sequences were generated by PCR, sequenced, and subcloned into the mammalian expression plasmid pDT containing sequential N-terminal hexahistidine and FLAG (HF) epitopes as previously described [5]. HEK-293 cells (150 mm plates) were transfected with 50 µg cDNA encoding the rat isoform of nNOS by calcium phosphate precipitation, and stably transfected cells selected with genetin (400 µg/ml). cDNAs encoding each of the HF-human $\alpha_{1A}$-ARs were transfected into parental HEK-293 cells or cells stably transfected with nNOS by calcium phosphate precipitation and cells harvested 48–72 h later. The density of HF-1AR-ARs was measured by specific binding of $[^{125}\text{I}]-\text{HEAT}$ [7], and ranged from 100–500 fmol/mg protein.

Immunoprecipitation
HEK-293 cells expressing HF-tagged $\alpha_{1A}$-ARs, nNOS, or both, were harvested by scraping and fractionated by repeated centrifugation and homogenization. Cell lysates (1–2 mg protein) were solubilized in 1X buffer (25 mM Hepes and 150 mM NaCl, pH 7.4) with 2% n-Dodecyl-$\beta$-D-maltoside for 90 min at 4°C in buffer A (25 mM HEPES, 150 mM NaCl, pH 7.4) supplemented with protease inhibitors (aprotinin 2 µg/ml, leupeptin 2 µg/ml, pepstatin 2 µg/ml, benzamidine 2 µg/ml, PMSF 2 mM, and EDTA 50 mM). Solubilized samples were centrifuged, the supernatant diluted 10-fold with buffer A containing protease inhibitors, and incubated with 100–200 µl anti-Flag M2 affinity resin for 90 min at 4°C with gentle rotation [5]. Alternatively, the supernatant was incubated with 5 µl of anti-nNOS rabbit polyclonal antibody (200 µg/ml) for 90 min at 4°C and then incubated with 20 µl Protein A-agarose overnight at 4°C. Immunoprecipitated material was recovered by centrifugation and washed at least 4 times with buffer A containing protease inhibitors. After washing, samples immunoprecipitated with anti-Flag affinity resin were eluted with 100 to 200 µl buffer A containing 400 µg/ml Flag peptide, while samples immunoprecipitated with anti-nNOS antibody were eluted with 40 µl of 2X Laemmli loading buffer. All samples were deglycosylated after immunoprecipitation by treatment with 1 µl PNGase F for 2 h at room temperature. Aliquots of 30 µl were separated by 4–20% SDS-PAGE, transferred to nitrocellulose, and blotted with anti-Flag M2 antibodies conjugated to HRP (1:600) or anti-nNOS rabbit polyclonal antibodies (1:1,000) followed by goat anti-rabbit HRP-conjugated secondary antibodies (1:15,000). Proteins were visualized by ECL.

ERK phosphorylation in PC12 cells
Confluent PC12 cells stably transfected with HF-$\alpha_{1A}$-ARs [15] (~1 pmol/mg of protein) were serum-starved for 2 h before use, and incubated with or without L-NAME (500 µM/30 min). Cells were then incubated with more-
pinephrine or other agonists for 15 min and lysed with Laemmli sample buffer. Cell lysates were centrifuged and proteins (10 μg/lane) were separated by SDS-PAGE and transferred to nitrocellulose membranes. Phosphorylation of ERKs was detected by immunoblotting using a 1:1000 dilution of rabbit polyclonal dual phospho-specific ERK antibodies with HRP-conjugated goat anti-rabbit IgG as a secondary antibody and visualized by ECL.

List of abbreviations
AR, adrenergic receptor; nNOS, neuronal nitric oxide synthase; HF, hexahistidine/Flag tagged; ERK, extracellular signal regulated kinase; I-NAME, l-nitroarginine methyl ester; NGF, nerve growth factor

Authors' contributions
ASP carried out most of the biochemical work and performed the statistical analysis. The study was conceived and designed by ASP and KPM, who both participated in data analysis and writing. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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