Cysteine modification reveals which subunits form the ligand binding site in human heteromeric 5-HT₃AB receptors

A. J. Thompson, K. L. Price and S. C. R. Lummis

Department of Biochemistry, University of Cambridge, Cambridge CB2 1QW, UK

Non-technical summary Nerve signals are transmitted across cell membranes by receptors that can consist of multiple different subunits. The 5-HT₃ receptor is a pentamer which can function with A subunits alone, or with a mixture of A and B subunits. As 5-HT activates the receptor by binding at the interface of adjacent subunits, it is important to know which subunits are adjacent. Here we show that in both A-only and A+B receptors there is at least one A–A interface, without which the receptor cannot function. This knowledge is important for understanding the receptor mechanism, and also will allow the design of more specific drugs that act at the 5-HT binding site.

Abstract The ligand binding site of Cys-loop receptors is formed by residues on the principal (+) and complementary (−) faces of adjacent subunits, but the subunits that constitute the binding pocket in many heteromeric receptors are not yet clear. To probe the subunits involved in ligand binding in heteromeric human 5-HT₃AB receptors, we made cysteine substitutions to the + and − faces of A and B subunits, and measured their functional consequences in receptors expressed in Xenopus oocytes. All A subunit mutations altered or eliminated function. The same pattern of changes was seen at homomeric and heteromeric receptors containing cysteine substitutions at AR92 (− face), A L126 (+), A N128 (+), A I139 (−), A Q151 (−) and A T181 (+), and these receptors displayed further changes when the sulphhydryl modifying reagent methanethiosulfonate-ethylammonium (MTSEA) was applied. Modifications of A R92C (−) - and A T181C (+)-containing receptors were protected by the presence of agonist (5-HT) or antagonist (d-tubocurarine). In contrast modifications of the equivalent B subunit residues did not alter heteromeric receptor function. In addition a double mutant, A S206C (−)/E229C (+), only responded to 5-HT following DTT treatment in both homomorphic and heteromeric receptors, indicating receptor function was inhibited by a disulphide bond between an A+ and an A− interface in both receptor types. Our results are consistent with binding to an A+A− interface at both homomeric and heteromeric human 5-HT₃ receptors, and explain why the competitive pharmacologies of these two receptors are identical.

Introduction

5-HT₃ receptors are members of the Cys-loop receptor superfamily of ligand-gated ion channels that includes the nicotinic acetylcholine (nACh), GABA_A and glycine receptors (Reeves & Lummis, 2002; Thompson & Lummis, 2007). To date, five 5-HT₃ receptor subunits (A–E) have been identified, although only homomeric 5-HT₃A and heteromeric 5-HT₃AB receptors have been extensively characterised. These studies have shown
that the B subunit alters single channel conductance, response kinetics, current–voltage relationships, EC50, Hill slope, permeability to Ca2+ and the potency of some non-competitive antagonists, but the binding affinities of agonists and competitive antagonists are similar at both homomeric and heteromeric receptors (Davies et al. 1999; Dubin et al. 1999; Brady et al. 2001; Hapfelmeier et al. 2003; Kelley et al. 2003).

Agonists and competitive antagonists bind at the interface of two adjacent subunits, where three regions from each subunit converge: loops A–C from the principal (+) subunit and loops D–F from the complementary (−) subunit. As the receptors are pentameric, a series of different binding sites are possible in heteromeric receptors. An atomic force microscopy (AFM) study suggested a subunit binding sites are possible in heteromeric receptors. An mutagenesis study in mouse 5-HT3AB receptors (where these data are difficult to reconcile with a more recent face (Lochner & Lummis, 2010). Therefore, there may be differences in the stoichiometries of mouse and human receptors, or data from either the AFM or mutagenesis study may not represent the situation in vivo.

Establishing whether the B subunit is a determinant of binding is a valuable goal, as 5-HT3 receptor antagonists are widely used to treat emesis, and studies suggest that the efficacy of these drugs may critically depend on the subunit residues affect receptor function. sulphate complex), d-tubocurarine chloride (d-TC) and picrotoxin (PTX) were obtained from Sigma-Aldrich (Gillingham, UK). All other reagents were of the highest obtainable grade.

**Oocyte maintenance**

*Xenopus laevis* were purchased from NASCO (Fort Atkinson, WI, USA) and maintained according to standard methods (Goldin, 1992). Harvested stage V–VI *Xenopus* oocytes were washed in four changes of Ca2+-free ND96 (96 mM NaCl, 2 mM KCl, 1 mM MgCl2, 5 mM Heps, pH 7.5), de-folliculated in 1.5 mg ml−1 collagenase Type 1A for approximately 2 h, washed again in four changes of Ca2+-free ND96 and stored in ND96 containing 2.5 mM sodium pyruvate, 0.7 mM theophylline and 100 μg ml−1 gentamicin. cRNA was in vitro transcribed from linearised pgEMHE cDNA template using the mMessage mMachine T7 kit (Ambion, Austin, TX, USA). 5-HT3A cDNA was linearised using SpH1 and 5-HT3B cDNA was linearised with NheI. Stage V and VI oocytes were injected with 5 ng cRNA, and currents recorded 1–4 days post-injection. A ratio of 1:3 (A:B) was used for the expression of heteromeric 5-HT3 receptors, as studies indicate that an excess of the secondary subunit promotes the expression of heteromeric receptors (e.g. Rayes et al. 2009). The nomenclature used in this article adopts the recent recommendations of NC-IUPHAR (Collingridge et al. 2009).

**Site-directed mutagenesis**

Mutagenesis reactions were performed using the QuikChange method (Agilent Technologies Inc., CA, USA) using human 5-HT3A (accession number: P46098) and 5-HT3B (O95264, both kindly donated by John Peters). Cysteine residues were substituted for amino acids in binding loops A–F (Fig. 1). To facilitate comparisons with previous work, we have used the numbering of the equivalent residues in the mouse 5-HT3A subunit; for human 5-HT3A numbering 5 should be subtracted from the residue number, and for human 5-HT3B numbering 7 should be subtracted. Residues were chosen because they have been previously shown to be important for ligand binding and/or they are located in the binding site in a 5-HT3 receptor homology model (Thompson & Lummis, 2006).

**Materials**

**Methods**

**Materials**

Methanethiosulphonate (MTS) reagents were obtained from Biotium (Hayward, CA, USA). Serotonin (creatinine...
Figure 1. Residues that were mutated in this study

A, sequence alignment of human 5-HT3A and 5-HT3B subunits with Torpedo californica nACh receptor α and γ subunits, human GABAα receptor α1 subunit, and Lymnaea stagnalis AChBP. Residues mutated in this study are shown in bold on a grey background. The positions of the six binding loops A–F are indicated by black lines. B, a homology model of the 5-HT3A receptor showing the location of the A subunit residues (stick representation) mutated in this study. Note that the numbering of the A and B residues in panel A corresponds to the human 5-HT3 receptor, but the number in panel B is according to the mouse numbering used in this paper. Accession numbers for the alignment are: 5-HT3A P46098, 5-HT3B O95264, nACh α P02710, nACh γ P02714, GABA α1 P02710, AChBP P58154.
system. We found that the two systems gave identical results when parameters from concentration–response curves were compared (eq. 1). For conventional two-electrode voltage clamp electrophysiology, *Xenopus* oocytes were clamped at −60 mV using an OC-725 amplifier (Warner Instruments, LLC, Hamden, CT, USA), Digidata 1322A (Molecular Devices, Sunnyvale, CA, USA) and the Strathclyde Electrophysiology Software Package (Department of Physiology and Pharmacology, University of Strathclyde, UK). Currents were filtered at a frequency of 1 kHz and sampled at 3 kHz. Micro-electrodes were fabricated from borosilicate glass (GC120TF-10, Harvard Apparatus, Edenbridge, UK) using a two stage horizontal pull (P-87, Sutter Instrument Co., Novato, CA, USA) and filled with 3 M KCl. Pipette resistances ranged from 0.5 to 1.5 MΩ. Oocytes were perfused with Ca2+-free ND96 at a rate of 12 ml min−1. Drug application was via a simple gravity fed system calibrated to run at the same rate. Analysis and curve fitting were performed using Prism v. 3.0 (GraphPad Software Inc., La Jolla, CA, USA). Concentration–response and concentration–inhibition data for each oocyte were normalised to the maximum current for that oocyte. The mean ± standard error of the mean (SEM) of the normalised responses was calculated and the amplitude compared to that before treatment. Finally, receptors were subjected to MTSEA or MTSEA–biotin alone, to test for modification in the absence of a ligand. Percentage inhibition was calculated as:

\[
\frac{1 - (I_{\text{max}} \text{after MTSEA} / I_{\text{max}} \text{before MTSEA})}{100}
\]

(2)

Dithiothreitol (DTT) was used at 10 mM, and made fresh daily from frozen 1 M stocks. For treatment of double cysteine mutants, an initial application of 10 mM DTT for 1 min was used. Thereafter, 10 s treatments were used immediately prior to each of the 5-HT applications.

**Radioligand binding**

This was performed as described previously (Price & Lummis, 2004). Human embryonic kidney (HEK) 293 cells were maintained on 90 mm tissue culture plates at 37°C and 7% CO2 in a humidified atmosphere. Cells were transfected using polyethyleneimine (PEI). PEI (30 μl, 1 mg ml−1), 5 μl DNA (A or 1:3 A:B) and 1 ml DMEM were incubated for 10 min at room temperature, added drop-wise to a 80–90% confluent plate, and incubated for 2–3 days before harvesting. Transfected HEK 293 cells were then harvested, washed with HEPES buffer, and 50 μg of crude cell membranes incubated in 0.5 ml HEPES buffer containing [3H]granisetron in a total volume of 500 μl. Non-specific binding was determined using 1 mM quipazine. Reactions were incubated at least 1 h on ice, and then terminated by vacuum filtration using a Brandel cell harvester onto GF/B filters pre-soaked in 0.3 % polyethyleneimine. Radioactivity was determined by scintillation counting. Data were analysed using Prism.

**Results**

**5-HT3A and 5-HT3AB receptors have distinct characteristics**

Wild-type and mutant 5-HT3 receptors were expressed as either homomeric (A or A) or heteromeric (AB, AB or AB) receptors. 5-HT3AB receptors differed from 5-HT3A receptors in their current profiles, EC50 values, Hill slopes and picrotoxin (PTX) sensitivity, consistent with previous reports (Davies et al. 1999; Hapfelmeier et al. 2003; Thompson et al. 2007). Current response decay in the presence of 5-HT was more rapid in heteromeric than in homomeric receptors, which showed almost no decay in our buffer (no added Ca2++; Fig. 2A and Fig. S1). Heteromeric receptors also had higher EC50 values (15-fold) and lower Hill slopes (2.8-fold) than for homomeric receptors (Fig. 2A and Fig. S1), and the potency of PTX was less, with IC50 values of 9.5 μM (pIC50 = 5.02 ± 0.09, n = 9) for wild-type A-only receptors, and 55 μM (pIC50 = 4.26 ± 0.05, n = 5) for wild-type AB receptors (Fig. 2B).
5-HT3A subunit cysteine substitutions affect receptor properties

When expressed alone or in combination with the B subunit, four A subunit mutants (A_E129C, A_Y143C, A_Y153C and A_W183C; mouse 5-HT3A subunit numbering) were non-functional and A_W90C mutants had an EC_{50} that was too high to be accurately determined (Table 1, Fig. 3 and Fig S1). Receptors containing the A subunit mutants A_R92C, A_L126C, A_N128C, A_I139C, A_Q151C and A_T181C had significant increases in EC_{50}. A similar pattern of changes was seen in oocytes containing mutant A subunits coexpressed with wild-type B subunits.

5-HT3B subunit mutations have no effect on receptor properties

In contrast to mutant A subunits, all mutant B subunits produced functional receptors when co-expressed with wild-type A subunits. With the exception of AB_W90C, none of these heteromorphic receptors had EC_{50} values that differed significantly from wild-type 5-HT3AB receptors, and all were significantly different from those containing only A subunits, with at least three of the four properties that distinguish 5-HT3AB and 5-HT3A receptors described above (Table 1, Fig. 3 and Fig S1).

MTSEA treatment of 5-HT3A subunit mutants further affects receptor function

Modification of A_{N128C} and A_{T181C} completely abolished functional responses to 5-HT. There were also changes in EC_{50} values for A_{L126C} and A_{I139C} mutants (Table 1, Fig. 4A). Functional A subunit mutants showed reduced maximal current amplitudes (I_{\text{max}}) following MTSEA treatment, except for those containing A_{I139C}, where I_{\text{max}} was increased ∼17-fold (Fig. 4B).

The patterns of MTSEA effects on EC_{50} and I_{\text{max}} were the same for A_{mut}B receptors (Fig. 4A and B, Fig. S1). Striking examples of this include the complete block by MTSEA at A_{mut} and A_{mut}B receptors containing A_{N128C} or A_{T181C}, a reduced EC_{50} and increased I_{\text{max}} for those containing A_{I139C}, and a reduced I_{\text{max}} for A_{R92C}, A_{L126C} and A_{Q151C}.

Application of MTSEA to wild-type 5-HT3A receptors caused no changes to their concentration-response curves (Fig. 2A).

---

Figure 2. 5-HT concentration–response and PTX concentration–inhibition curves for A and AB receptors

A, 5-HT concentration–response curves. Wild-type receptors were unaltered by MTSEA (comparisons are also shown in Fig. 4). The calculated EC_{50} values and Hill slopes can be found in Table 1. Typical EC_{50} 5-HT responses are shown next to each curve. B, PTX concentration–inhibition curves. The presence of the B subunit is confirmed by a rightward shift in the PTX concentration–inhibition curve in heteromeric receptors. The mutants shown are examples, and are the same as those in Fig. 5.
5-HT3B subunit mutants are not affected by MTSEA modification

MTSEA had no effect on either the EC$_{50}$ or $I_{\text{max}}$ of 5-HT$_3$AB or any 5-HT$_3$AB$_{\text{mut}}$ receptors (Table 1, Figs 2A and 4A and B) indicating that MTSEA modification of B subunit cysteines does not significantly impact on receptor function or that it does not modify these receptors.

Ligands can protect against MTS reagent modification

To determine whether competitive ligands could protect against MTSEA and MTSEA–biotin modification, we examined a residue on the principal (residue 181) and the complementary binding face (residue 92) of each subunit. These residues were chosen as they showed very clear changes in response following the addition of MTSEA. We examined the effects of both an agonist (5-HT) and an antagonist (d-TC) to minimise the risk of making residues inaccessible to MTS modification as a result of a conformational change induced by an antagonist (Hansen et al. 2005).

At A$_{B92C}$ and A$_{B92C}$B receptors MTSEA–biotin almost completely inhibited the 5-HT-induced response (Fig. 5A), but inhibition was completely prevented by co-application of 5-HT or d-TC with MTSEA–biotin. Similarly A$_{T181C}$ and A$_{T181C}$B receptors were inhibited by MTSEA, and protected from inhibition by 5-HT and d-TC.

---

Table 1. Concentration–response parameters of A, B, D and E loop cysteine mutants

| Loop | Mutant     | pEC$_{50}$ | EC$_{50}$ (µM) | $n_H$ | n  | pEC$_{50}$ | EC$_{50}$ (µM) | $n_H$ | n  |
|------|------------|------------|----------------|-------|----|------------|----------------|-------|----|
|      |            | Before MTSEA | After MTSEA   |       |    | Before MTSEA | After MTSEA   |       |    |
| 5-HT3B subunit mutants are not affected by MTSEA modification |

MTSEA had no effect on either the EC$_{50}$ or $I_{\text{max}}$ of 5-HT$_3$AB or any 5-HT$_3$AB$_{\text{mut}}$ receptors (Table 1, Figs 2A and 4A and B) indicating that MTSEA modification of B subunit cysteines does not significantly impact on receptor function or that it does not modify these receptors.

Ligands can protect against MTS reagent modification

To determine whether competitive ligands could protect against MTSEA and MTSEA–biotin modification, we examined a residue on the principal (residue 181) and the complementary binding face (residue 92) of each sub-
The binding site of heteromeric 5-HT\textsubscript{3} receptors

(54x735)J Physiol
589.17 The binding site of heteromeric 5-HT\textsubscript{3} receptors

Protection experiments could not be performed on the equivalent B subunit residues as AB\textsubscript{Q92C} and AB\textsubscript{K181C} were unaffected by MTSEA or MTSEA–biotin (Table 1, Fig. 4A and B; Fig. 5D). The results indicate that both A\textsubscript{R92} (−) and A\textsubscript{T181} (+) are part of the binding site for 5-HT and d-TC in both homomeric and heteromeric receptors (i.e. ligand binding occurs at A+A– interfaces in both receptor types).

5-HT3A subunit double cysteine mutants respond only after DTT treatment

As an additional test of whether A+A– interfaces are present in heteromeric receptors, a series of double mutants were made with cysteine residues located at opposite sides of the binding site; if these residues are sufficiently close, we would expect disulphide bonds to form between them and modify receptor function. They were engineered into loop C residues on the principal face and either loop E or F residues on the complementary face; in the nAChR these loops come into close proximity upon agonist binding (Gleitsman et al. 2008; Mukhtasimova et al. 2009).

AD\textsubscript{204C}/S\textsubscript{227C}, AS\textsubscript{206C}/S\textsubscript{227C} and AF\textsubscript{208C}/S\textsubscript{227C} responded to 5-HT and were unaffected by DTT, indicating that either no disulphide bonds were formed, or that cross-linking here does not affect receptor function (Table 2). In contrast, both A\textsubscript{Y153C}/S\textsubscript{227C} and A\textsubscript{S206C}/E\textsubscript{229C} only responded to 5-HT following DTT treatment, although the former had responses too small (<100 nA) for further study (Fig. 6A and B). Responses of A\textsubscript{S206C}/E\textsubscript{229C} mutant receptors slowly decreased following removal of DTT suggesting spontaneous reformation of disulphide bonds (Fig. 6E). This rate of reformation of bonds followed a single exponential and was complete within 24 min. It was reversed if DTT was re-applied. Expression of the single substitutions showed no DTT effect, demonstrating that the disulphide bond only formed when both substitutions were present. These data indicate that S206C and E229C are sufficiently close to spontaneously form a disulphide bond, and, as they are too far apart to interact within a single subunit, S206C must interact with E229C in the adjacent subunit, cross-linking two subunits across the binding site interface and preventing access or binding of 5-HT (Fig. 6C).

We also explored MTSEA treatment of these mutants. Following DTT application, MTSEA treatment of AS\textsubscript{206C}/E\textsubscript{229C} receptors caused complete block of the 5-HT response (Fig. 6A), although neither of the single mutants alone was affected by MTSEA modification, indicating that two molecules of MTSEA are required to block ligand

Figure 3. Relative EC\textsubscript{50} values of wild-type and mutant receptors

Asterisks denote statistically different from wild-type. NF: non-functional at 100 μM 5-HT, or with an EC\textsubscript{50} too high to be accurately determined. Relative values are shown as the differences ± SED. Data from Table 1. The dotted line represents the difference between wild-type 5-HT\textsubscript{3}A and wild-type 5-HT\textsubscript{3}AB responses.

© 2011 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2011 The Physiological Society
**Figure 4.** The effect of MTSEA on wild-type and mutant receptors

The EC\textsubscript{50} or I\textsubscript{max} obtained after MTSEA treatment is compared to that obtained before treatment. BLOCK: complete inhibition by MTSEA. Asterisks denote statistically different from wild-type. NF: non-functional at 100 μM 5-HT.

Relative EC\textsubscript{50} (after MTSEA/before MTSEA)

Relative I\textsubscript{max} (after MTSEA/before MTSEA)

Relative values are expressed as the difference ± SED. Data from Table 1.
Figure 5. Agonist (5-HT) and antagonist (d-TC) protection of mutant receptors from MTS modification

A, AR92C and AR92CB receptors are completely protected from MTSEA–biotin modification by the presence of either agonist (5-HT) or antagonist (d-TC). There is no effect of MTSEA–biotin on ABQ92C receptors. R92 is a loop D residue located on the A subunit complementary (−) face; Q92 is the equivalent B subunit residue. B, AT181C and AT181CB receptors are completely protected from MTSEA modification by the presence of either agonist (5-HT) or antagonist (d-TC). There is no effect of MTSEA on ABK181C receptors. T181 is a loop B residue located on the A subunit principal (+) face; K181 is the equivalent B subunit residue. Typical current traces from oocytes expressing AR92C (C) or ABQ92C (D) receptors are also shown. 5-HT application (200 μM for AR92C or 30 μM for ABQ92C) is denoted by a black bar above the trace. Arrows indicate applications of MTSEA–biotin (2 mM with or without 1 mM 5-HT) for 2 min, followed by wash for 2 min (see methods for details). E, structures of MTSEA and MTSEA–biotin.
access when attached to these particular residues. The 5-HT response could be recovered following application of DTT.

Co-expression of the wild-type B subunit with A206C/E229C produced heteromeric receptors that similarly only responded to 5-HT after DTT treatment (Fig. 6B and D). Hill slopes were close to unity and 5-HT concentration–response curves yielded EC$_{50}$ values that were increased compared to both homomeric A206C/E229C mutants (4.5-fold) and wild-type heteromeric receptors (4-fold), indicating that these were heteromeric and not homomeric receptors. The effect of DTT on heteromeric receptors shows that active A– interfaces must be present. The data also show that A+B– and B+A– interfaces do not contribute to receptor activation, as there was no discernable current before DTT treatment, as single A+ or A– Cys mutants do not inhibit function.

### Radioligand binding

Saturation binding experiments at 5-HT$_3$A and 5-HT$_3$AB receptors expressed in HEK cells revealed similar affinities for [3H]granisetron binding (0.55 and 0.68 nM respectively; Table 3) and similar IC$_{50}$ values for 5-HT displacement (0.09 ± 0.01 and 0.12 ± 0.03 μM, respectively) as reported in previous studies (Davies et al. 1999; Dubin et al. 1999; Brady et al. 2001; Hapfelmeier et al. 2003; Kelley et al. 2003). These data therefore support the idea of identical binding sites for agonists and antagonists in 5-HT$_3$A and 5-HT$_3$AB receptors. We also examined the binding affinities on a range of $A_{mut}$B and $AB_{mut}$ receptors (Table 3). These data show affinities can be modified or binding ablated in $A_{mut}$–containing receptors at residues which have previously been shown to contribute to the ligand binding site (e.g. W90 and W183), with no change for those mutant receptors which are more peripheral to the binding pocket (e.g. L126 and Q151). These data also confirm the greater sensitivity of functional versus binding assays, e.g. mutation of the A subunit at residues L126 and Q151 revealed changes in function but not binding. This is similar to previous reports, e.g. an alanine scan of 15 consecutive amino acids in loop B of the 5-HT$_3$ receptor showed that nine of these affected [3H]granisetron binding but all affected the 5-HT EC$_{50}$ (Thompson et al. 2008). The contributions to ligand binding of most of the A subunit residues mutated in this study have been previously examined using a range of different amino acids, and their contributions to binding extensively discussed (see Thompson & Lummis, 2006 for review or reports therein).

### Discussion

The ligand binding site of the 5-HT$_3$ receptor is formed by the convergence of amino acid loops from two adjacent subunits, termed principal (+) and complementary (−). Binding sites in the homomeric 5-HT$_3$A receptor are composed of A+A– interfaces, but binding sites in the heteromeric 5-HT$_3$AB receptor could be located at A+A–, A+B–, B+A– or B+B– interfaces. Given the inconsistencies of 5-HT$_3$AB stoichiometries in the literature, we have performed a range of experiments (including disulphide trapping and the substituted cysteine accessibility method or SCAM) on cysteine-substituted residues to clarify which subunit interfaces are present in the human heteromeric 5-HT$_3$AB receptor ligand binding site. The data show no effect of B subunit mutations, no rescue of non-functional A subunit

---

Table 2. Concentration–response parameters of C and F loop cysteine mutants

| Mutant          | Before MTSEA |         |         |         |         |         |         |         |
|-----------------|--------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
|                 | pEC$_{50}$   | EC$_{50}$ | $n_H$   | n       | pEC$_{50}$ | EC$_{50}$ | $n_H$   | n       |
| $A_{S203C}$     | 5.25 ± 0.07  | 5.66    | 1.42    | 3       | 5.13 ± 0.03 | 7.48     | 1.46    | 3       |
| $A_{D204C}$     | 4.04 ± 0.05* | 9.07    | 1.73    | 3       | 4.00 ± 0.08 | 9.92     | 1.41    | 3       |
| $A_{S206C}$     | 5.31 ± 0.04  | 4.86    | 2.43    | 3       | 5.19 ± 0.02 | 6.39     | 2.44    | 3       |
| $A_{V208C}$     | 4.36 ± 0.05* | 44.0    | 1.71    | 4       | 3.55 ± 0.02* | 284      | 1.84    | 3       |
| $A_{S227C}$     | 5.23 ± 0.02  | 5.86    | 2.70    | 3       | 5.33 ± 0.02 | 4.64     | 2.35    | 3       |
| $A_{E229C}$     | 4.56 ± 0.03* | 27.5    | 1.83    | 6       | 4.45 ± 0.04 | 35.2     | 1.56    | 4       |
| $A_{Y153C/S227C}$ | SR           | —       | —       | 9       | ND       | BLOCK$^+$| —       | 5       |
| $A_{D204C/S227C}$ | 4.00 ± 0.02* | 101     | 3.43    | 3       | ND       | BLOCK$^+$| —       | 5       |
| $A_{S206C/S227C}$ | 4.60 ± 0.03* | 25.4    | 1.51    | 3       | ND       | BLOCK$^+$| —       | 5       |
| $A_{S208C/E227C}$ | 4.19 ± 0.02* | 64.0    | 3.18    | 6       | ND       | BLOCK$^+$| —       | 5       |
| $A_{S206C/E229C}$ | 4.58 ± 0.02+DTT | 26.0  | 2.15    | 5       | BLOCK$^+$| —       | 5       |
| $A_{S206C/E229C}$ | 3.93 ± 0.06+DTT | 118 | 1.04    | 9       | BLOCK$^+$| —       | 4       |

Data are means ± SEM; *significantly different to WT; †significantly different following MTSEA treatment; ND = not determined; DTT = Response only seen after DTT treatment; SR = small response (<0.1 μA at 1 mM 5-HT).
Figure 6. The effects of DTT on homomeric and heteromeric receptors containing A subunit double cysteine mutations (A206C/E229C) in the C and F loops

A, 5-HT-induced currents are only seen after application of DTT (10 mM for 1 min). A subsequent application of MTSEA (2 mM for 1 min) inhibits this response; this inhibition can be reversed by DTT. B, DTT treatment is also required for 5-HT-induced responses in heteromeric A206C/E229C receptors.

C, the locations of S206 and E229 on a 5-HT3 receptor homology model (template PDB ID: 2PGZ). D, Concentration–response curves for homomeric and heteromeric receptors containing the A subunit double cysteine mutant. Parameters derived from these curves (Table 2) are consistent with those expected for homomeric and heteromeric responses. E, Disulphide bonds spontaneously reform in A206C/E229C mutant receptors. Following removal of DTT, peak current responses to 5-HT (100 μM) decline with an exponential time course (τ = 0.17 ± 0.01 min⁻¹), but recover following several 10 s DTT applications (arrows). All traces are representative of ≥4 separate experiments.

© 2011 The Authors. Journal compilation © 2011 The Physiological Society
mutations by B subunits, and cross linking of A residues located on either side of the binding pocket in both homomeric and heteromeric receptors. These results are only consistent with the binding sites of both homomeric and heteromeric human 5-HT$_3$ receptors being located at A$+$A$-$ interfaces.

Cysteine substitution of A subunit residues, and covalent modification of these with MTSEA, confirmed the importance and accessibility of residues that have covalent modification of these with MTSEA, confirmed the importance and accessibility of residues that have been previously identified in mutagenesis and modelling studies (Venkataraman et al. 2003; Thompson et al. 2002). 5-HT$_3$AB receptors have distinct cellular domains (Davies et al. 1999; Brady et al. 2001; Das & Dillon, 2003; Hapfelmeier et al. 2003; Holbrook et al. 2009). The affinities of agonists and competitive antagonists, however, are almost identical at homomeric and heteromeric receptors, implying that they share a common binding site at an A$+$A$-$ interface.

Our current data support the hypothesis that the ligand binding site in both homomeric and heteromeric receptors is located at the interface of adjacent A subunits, and is consistent with a recent study on mouse 5-HT$_3$AB receptors where residues from the B subunit were substituted with the aligning residues of the A subunit and vice versa (Lochner & Lummis, 2010); mutations in the A, but not the B, subunit caused changes in the 5-HT-elicited response and the affinity ($K_d$) of the radiolabelled competitive antagonist $[^3]$H$|$granisetron. In our current work we used human and not mouse receptors, and probed a wider range of potential binding site residues throughout loops A–F. We observed large functional changes at all homomeric and heteromeric receptors containing modified A subunit residues, but none at those with B subunit modiﬁcations. Similarly, there were changes in $[^3]$H$|$granisetron binding afﬁnity to receptors with A subunit mutations, and no changes to those containing B subunit mutations. If B subunits were part of the binding pocket we would expect to observe at least some changes, as previous reports have shown that the binding site is highly sensitive to changes of both ligand-interacting and non-interacting residues (Spier & Lummis, 2000; Beene et al. 2004; Price & Lummis, 2004; Thompson et al. 2005; Sullivan et al. 2006; Price et al. 2008). Equivalent locations of the A and B subunit residues can only be conﬁrmed when we have high resolution structural data, but strong evidence to support similar secondary structures of these subunits comes from crystal structures in homologous proteins: e.g. AChBP and ELIC have only $\sim$18% sequence identity and yet the structures of these receptors overlay with only 1.5 Å root mean square deviation (Hilf & Dutler, 2008). Given the considerably higher sequence similarity between the A and B extracellular domains, we would expect that the residues in the B subunit binding site to be positioned similarly to those in A subunits. Indeed it seems inconceivable, given the large number of substitutions that were made to both the principal and complementary faces of the B subunit, that none would have had an effect if this subunit contributed to the binding site, particularly as all A subunit modifications signiﬁcantly altered receptor responses.

We also consider it unlikely that responses from oocytes injected with both A and B subunits are contaminated by homomeric currents, as neither we nor other researchers in this domain have seen evidence of homomers when heteromers are expressed (e.g. Barrera et al. 2005). This may be because B subunits cannot express alone and therefore strongly interact with any A subunits.
that have been produced, and some support for this speculative hypothesis comes from studies showing that co-transfection with B subunits results in the function of some non-responding mutant A subunits (Wu et al. 2010). We have taken great care in this study to demonstrate that the properties of the receptors are consistent with heteromers and not homomers whenever we express both subunits; the altered EC₅₀ values, Hill slopes, characteristic response profiles and PTX sensitivity, provide strong evidence that we have heteromeric and not homomeric receptors.

Our data demonstrate an A⁺A⁻ interface in heteromeric receptors, and although this agrees with a previous study on mouse receptors, it conflicts with a study using AFM that defined the subunit arrangement around the receptor rosette as BBABA, i.e. no A⁺A⁻ interfaces (Barrera et al. 2005). Although it is difficult to explain the discrepancy between these results, there are several possible explanations. For example, the stoichiometry of Cys-loop receptors can be influenced by external factors such as temperature or the ratios of subunit DNA transfected (Zwart & Vijverberg, 1998; Nelson et al. 2003), and expression systems and added tags may also be critical. It may be that differences in endogenous levels of chaperones, e.g. 14-3-3 and RIC-3, affect stoichiometry and expression of nACh and 5-HT₃ receptors (Exley et al. 2006; Walstab et al. 2010). The location of the receptors being examined may also be important and a possible explanation for the differences may be simply that we sampled only functional cell surface receptors, whilst AFM detects both intracellular and cell surface receptors, the former of which may be non-functional.

Several of our A subunit cysteine mutants were non-functional (W90, E129, Y143, Y153 and W183), which confirms the critical importance of these residues as reported elsewhere (Spier, 2000; Yan et al. 1999; Venkataraman et al. 2002; Beene et al. 2004; Price & Lummis, 2004; Thompson et al. 2005, 2008; Sullivan et al. 2006; Price et al. 2008). The other A subunit mutants were all modified by MTSEA, which places them on a solvent accessible surface. These data, and the proximity of S206 and E229 on loops C and F, support the homology models we originally used to identify the target residues (Fig. 1; Reeves et al. 2003; Thompson et al. 2005). Residues we studied here also show similarities in accessibility and protection to the aligning residues of other members of the Cys-loop family. For example, the residues equivalent to the A subunit R92 in nACh (Torpedo γE57; Sullivan & Cohen, 2000) and GABA₆ (α1R66; Boileau et al. 1999) receptors are modified by MTS compounds and protected by competitive ligands, demonstrating that they line the ligand binding site. Residues that align with Y143 and Y153 in the nACh (γL109C) and GABA₆ (S168C) receptors can also be protected from MTS modification (Sullivan & Cohen, 2000; Sedelnikova et al. 2005), although Y143 and Y153 could not be tested in our study as the cysteine substitutions generated non-functional receptors.

Residues that face into the binding site and directly contact the ligand may be less likely to produce gross structural changes that alter receptor gating than residues which point into the protein interior (Ward et al. 1990; Chen et al. 1998; Brams et al. 2011). However, gating effects may explain the MTSEA-dependent potentiation that was displayed by receptors containing the A subunit mutation I139C, which was the only residue in this study that was not predicted to be in the binding site. None of the B subunit mutations displayed this (or any other) effect, suggesting that the B subunit residues we investigated do not have a role in gating. This contrasts with B subunit residues in the pore and the intracellular domain, the former of which are responsible for the differing potencies of bilobalide, ginkgolide B, chloroquine, mefloquine and PTX at homomeric and heteromeric receptors, and the latter for the dramatic increase in single channel conductance observed when B subunits are incorporated into heteromeric receptors (Kelley et al. 2003; Das & Dillon, 2005; Thompson et al. 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Thompson et al. 2011).

Our data are insufficient to define a stoichiometry for the heteromeric receptor as there are four possible stoichiometries that are compatible with our results: AAAAB, AABAB, AAABB and AABB. The first is less likely as a 4:1 stoichiometry is unknown in the Cys-loop receptor superfamily, although there are many examples of non-responding mutant A subunits (Wu et al. 2010). The location of the receptors being examined may also be important and a possible explanation for the differences may be simply that we sampled only functional cell surface receptors, whilst AFM detects both intracellular and cell surface receptors, the former of which may be non-functional.

In summary, we describe methods for probing the subunits that contribute to binding and activation at heteromeric Cys-loop receptors. The effects of (a) cysteine mutations in the 5-HT₃ receptor A subunit, and absence
of changes in the modified B subunit, (b) MTSEA modification of only A subunits, (c) protection of A subunit residues from MTS-modification, and (d) the presence of disulphide bonds between A+ and A– substituted residues in homomeric and heteromeric receptors, provides compelling evidence that ligands bind to a common A+A– interface in both receptor types, a location supported by their identical competitive pharmacologies.

References

Barrera NP, Herbert P, Henderson RM, Martin IL & Edwardson JM (2005). Atomic force microscopy reveals the stoichiometry and subunit arrangement of 5-HT₃ receptors. Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A 102, 12595–12600.

Beene DL, Price KL, Lester HA, Dougherty DA & Lummis SC (2004). Tyrosine residues that control binding and gating in the 5-hydroxytryptamine receptor revealed by unnatural amino acid mutagenesis. J Neurosci 24, 9097–9104.

Bhatnacharya A, Dang H, Zhu QM, Schnegelberg B, Rozengurt N, Cain G, Prantil R, Vorp DA, Guy N, Julius D, Ford AP, Lester HA & Cockayne DA (2004). Uroplastic observations in mice expressing a constitutively active point mutation in the 5-HT3A receptor subunit. J Neurosci 24, 5537–5548.

Boileau AJ, Evers AR, Davis AF & Czajkowski C (1999). Determination of the agonist binding site of the GABAₐ receptor: evidence for a β-strand. J Neurosci 19, 4847–4854.

Boyd GW, Low P, Dunlop II, Robertson LA, Vardy A, Lambert JJ, Peters JA & Connolly CN (2002). Assembly and cell surface expression of homomeric and heteromeric 5-HT₃ receptors: the role of oligomerization and chaperone proteins. Mol Cell Neurosci 21, 38–50.

Brady CA, Stanford IM, Ali ILL, Williams JM, Dubin AE, Hope AG & Barnes NM (2001). Pharmacological comparison of human homomeric 5-HT3A receptors versus heteromeric 5-HT3A/3B receptors. Neuropharmacology 41, 282–284.

Brams M, Gay EA, Saez JC, Guskov A, Van Elk R, Van Der Schors RC, Peigneur S, Tytgat J, Strelkov SV, Smit AB, Yakel JL & Ulens C (2011). Crystal structures of a cysteine-modified mutant in loop D of acetylcholine-binding protein. J Biol Chem 286, 4420–4428.

Chen JG, Liu-Chen S & Rudnick G (1998). Determination of external loop topology in the serotonin transporter by site-directed chemical labeling. J Biol Chem 273, 12675–12681.

Collingridge GL, Olsen RW, Peters J & Spedding M (2009). A nomenclature for ligand-gated ion channels. Neuropsychopharmacology 56, 2–5.

Das P & Dillon GH (2003). The 5-HT3B subunit confers reduced sensitivity to picrotoxin when co-expressed with the 5-HT3A receptor. Brain Res Mol Brain Res 119, 207–212.

Das P & Dillon GH (2005). Molecular determinants of picrotoxin inhibition of 5-hydroxytryptamine type 3 receptors. J Pharmacol Exp Ther 314, 320–328.

Davies PA, Pistics M, Hanna MC, Peters JA, Lambert JJ, Hales TG & Kirkness EF (1999). The 5-HT3B subunit is a major determinant of serotonin-receptor function. Nature 397, 359–363.

Dubin AE, Huvard RD, Andrea MR, Pyati J, Zhu JY, Joy KC, Wilson SJ, Galindo JE, Glass CA, Luo L, Jackson MR, Lovenberg TW & Erlander MG (1999). The pharmacological and functional characteristics of the serotonin 5-HT3A receptor are specifically modified by a 5-HT3B receptor subunit. J Biol Chem 274, 30799–30810.

Exley R, Moroni M, Sasdeli F, Houlihan LM, Lukas RJ, Sher E, Zwart R & Bermudez I (2006). Chaperone protein 14–3–3 and protein kinase A increase the relative abundance of low agonist sensitivity human α4β2 nicotinic acetylcholine receptors in Xenopus oocytes. J Neurochem 98, 876–885.

Gleitsman KR, Fedrowski SM, Lester HA & Dougherty DA (2008). An intersubunit hydrogen bond in the nicotinic acetylcholine receptor that contributes to channel gating. J Biol Chem 283, 35638–35643.

Goldin AR (1992). Maintenance of Xenopus laevis and oocyte injection. Methods Enzymol 207, 267–279.

Hansen SB, Sulzenbacher G, Huxford T, Marchot P, Taylor P & Bourne Y (2005). Structures of Aplysia AChBP complexes with nicotinic agonists and antagonists reveal distinctive binding interfaces and conformations. EMBO J 24, 3635–3646.

Hapfelmeyer G, Tredt C, Haseneder R, Ziegglansberger W, Eisensamer B, Rupprecht R & Rammes G (2003). Co-expression of the 5-HT3B serotonin receptor subunit alters the biophysics of the 5-HT₃ receptor. Biophys J 84, 1720–1733.

Hilf RJ & Dutzler R (2008). X-ray structure of a prokaryotic pentameric ligand-gated ion channel. Nature 452, 375–379.

Holbrook JD, Gill CH, Zebda N, Spencer JP, Leyland R, Rance KH, Trinh H, Balmer G, Kelly FM, Yusaf SP, Courtenay N, Luck J, Rhodes A, Modha S, Moore SE, Sanger GJ & Gunthorpe MJ (2009). Characterisation of 5-HT3C, 5-HT3D and 5-HT3E receptor subunits: evolution, distribution and function. J Neurochem 108, 384–396.

Hu XQ & Peoples RW (2008). The 5-HT₁₈ subunit confers spontaneous channel opening and altered ligand properties of the 5-HT₃ receptor. J Biol Chem 283, 6826–6831.

Kelley SP, Dunlop JJ, Kirkness EF, Lambert JJ & Peters JA (2003). A cytoplasmic region determines single-channel conductance in 5-HT₃ receptors. Nature 424, 321–324.

Lochner M & Lummis SCR (2010). Agonists and antagonists bind to an A-A interface in the heteromeric 5-HT₃AB receptor. Biochem J 431, 1494–1502.

Mukhtasimova N, Lee WY, Wang HL & Sine SM (2009). Detection and trapping of intermediate states priming nicotinic receptor channel opening. Nature 459, 451–454.

Nelson ME, Kuryatov A, Choi CH, Zhou Y & Lindstrom J (2003). Alternate stoichiometries of α4β2 nicotinic acetylcholine receptors. Mol Pharmacol 63, 332–341.

Price KL, Bower KS, Thompson AJ, Lester HA, Dougherty DA & Lummis SC (2008). A hydrogen bond in loop A is critical for the binding and function of the 5-HT3 receptor. Biochemistry 47, 6370–6377.

Price KL & Lummis SC (2004). The role of tyrosine residues in the extracellular domain of the 5-hydroxytryptamine3 receptor. J Biol Chem 279, 23294–23301.
Rayes D, De Rosa MJ, Sine SM & Bouzat C (2009). Number and locations of agonist binding sites required to activate homomeric Cys-loop receptors. J Neurosci 29, 6022–6032.

Reeves DC & Lummis SC (2002). The molecular basis of the structure and function of the 5-HT3 receptor: a model ligand-gated ion channel (review). Mol Membr Biol 19, 11–26.

Reeves DC, Sayed MF, Chau PL, Price KL & Lummis SC (2003). Prediction of 5-HT3 receptor agonist-binding residues using homology modeling. Biophys J 84, 2338–2344.

Sedelnikova A, Smith CD, Zakharikin SO, Davis D, Weiss DS & Sedelnikova AI (2011). Mapping the ρ1 GABAc receptor agonist binding pocket. Constructing a complete model. J Biol Chem 280, 1535–1542.

Spier AD & Lummis SC (2000). The role of tryptophan residues in the 5-hydroxytryptamine, receptor ligand binding domain. J Biol Chem 275, 5620–5625.

Sullivan DA & Cohen JB (2000). Mapping the agonist binding site of the nicotinic acetylcholine receptor. Orientation requirements for activation by covalent agonist. J Biol Chem 275, 12651–12660.

Sullivan NL, Thompson AJ, Price KL & Lummis SC (2006). Defining the roles of Asn-128, Glu-129 and Phe-130 in loop A of the 5-HT3 receptor. Mol Membr Biol 23, 442–451.

Thompson AJ, Jarvis GE, Duke RK, Johnston GA & Lummis SC (2010a). Ginkgolide B and bilobalide block the pore of the 5-HT3 receptor at a location that overlaps the picrotoxin binding site. Neuropharmacology 58, 488–495.

Thompson AJ, Lochner M & Lummis SCR (2007). The antimalarial drugs quinine, chloroquine and mefloquine are antagonists at 5-HT3 receptors. Br J Pharmacol 151, 666–677.

Thompson AJ & Lummis SCR (2006). 5-HT3 receptors. Curr Pharm Des 12, 3615–3630.

Thompson AJ & Lummis SC (2007). The 5-HT3 receptor as a therapeutic target. Expert Opin Ther Targets 11, 527–540.

Thompson AJ, Price KL, Reeves DC, Chan SL, Chau PL & Lummis SC (2005). Locating an antagonist in the 5-HT3 receptor binding site using modeling and radioligand binding. J Biol Chem 280, 20476–20482.

Thompson AJ, Lester HA & Lummis SCR (2010b). The structural basis of function in Cys-loop receptors. Q Rev Biophys 43, 449–499.

Thompson AJ, Lochner M & Lummis SC (2008). Loop B is a major structural component of the 5-HT3 receptor. Biophys J 95, 5728–5736.

Thompson AJ, Duke RK, Lummis SC (2011). Binding sites for bilobalide, diltiazem, ginkgolide and picrotoxinin at the 5-HT3 receptor. Mol Pharmacol 80, 183–190.

Tremblay PB, Kaiser R, Sezer O, Rosler N, Schelenz C, Possinger K, Roots I & Brockmoller J (2003). Variations in the 5-hydroxytryptamine type 3B receptor gene as predictors of the efficacy of antiemetic treatment in cancer patients. J Clin Oncol 21, 2147–2155.

Venkataraman P, Venkatachalan SP, Joshi PR, Muthalagi M & Schulke MT (2002). Identification of critical residues in loop E in the 5-HT3ASR binding site. BMC Biochem 3, 15.

Walstaj J, Hammar C, Lasitschka F, Moller D, Connolly CN, Rappold G, Bruss M, Bonisch H & Niesler B (2010). RIC-3 exclusively enhances the surface expression of human homomeric 5-hydroxytryptamine type 3A (5-HT3A) receptors despite direct interactions with 5-HT3A, -C, -D, and -E subunits. J Biol Chem 285, 26956–26965.

Ward WH, Timms D & Fersht AR (1990). Protein engineering and the study of structure–function relationships in receptors. Trends Pharmacol Sci 11, 280–284.

Wu DF, Othman NA, Sharp D, Mahendra A, Deeb TZ & Hales TG (2010). A cysteine residue in the third transmembrane domain is essential for homomeric 5-HT3 receptor function. J Physiol 588, 603–616.

Yan D, Meyer JK & White MM (2006). Mapping residues in the ligand-binding domain of the 5-HT3 receptor onto d-tubocurarine structure. Mol Pharmacol 70, 571–578.

Yan D, Schulke MT, Bloom KE & White MM (1999). Structural features of the ligand-binding domain of the serotonin 5HT3 receptor. J Biol Chem 274, 5537–5541.

Zwart R & Vrijverberg HP (1998). Four pharmacologically distinct subtypes of α4β2 nicotinic acetylcholine receptor expressed in Xenopus laevis oocytes. Mol Pharmacol 54, 1124–1131.

Author contributions

Conception and design of the study: A.J.T., K.L.P. and S.C.R.L. Collection and analysis of data: A.J.T. and K.L.P. Interpretation of data: A.J.T., K.L.P. and S.C.R.L. Drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content: A.J.T., K.L.P. and S.C.R.L. Obtaining funding for the study: S.C.R.L. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Wellcome Trust (081925/Z/07/Z). S.C.R.L. is a Wellcome Trust Senior Research Fellow in Basic Biomedical Studies.