Differential Modulation of Arcuate Nucleus and Mesolimbic Gene Expression Levels by Central Leptin in Rats on Short-Term High-Fat High-Sugar Diet

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Abstract

Objective: Leptin resistance is a common hallmark of obesity. Rats on a free-choice high-fat high-sugar (fcHFHS) diet are resistant to peripherally administered leptin. The aim of this study was to investigate feeding responses to central leptin as well as the associated changes in mRNA levels in hypothalamic and mesolimbic brain areas.

Design and Methods: Rats on a CHOW or fcHFHS diet for 8 days received leptin or vehicle intracerebro(lateral)ventricularly (ICV) and food intake was measured 5 h and 24 h later. Four days later, rats were sacrificed after ICV leptin or vehicle and mRNA levels were quantified for hypothalamic pro-opiomelanocortin (POMC) and neuropeptide Y (NPY) and for preproenkephalin (ppENK) in nucleus accumbens and tyrosine hydroxylase (TH) in ventral tegmental area (VTA).

Results: ICV leptin decreased caloric intake both in CHOW and fcHFHS rats. In fcHFHS, leptin preferentially decreased chow and fat intake. Leptin increased POMC and decreased NPY mRNA in CHOW, but not in fcHFHS rats. In CHOW rats, leptin had no effect on ppENK mRNA and decreased TH mRNA. In fcHFHS, leptin decreased ppENK mRNA and increased TH mRNA.

Conclusion: Despite peripheral and arcuate leptin resistance, central leptin suppresses feeding in fcHFHS rats. As the VTA and nucleus accumbens are still responsive to leptin, these brain areas may therefore, at least partly, account for the leptin-induced feeding suppression in rats on a fcHFHS diet.

Introduction

Since the discovery of leptin in 1994 [1] a wealth of studies has been generated on leptin’s role in feeding behavior and metabolism. Leptin is secreted from adipose tissue and exerts several metabolic functions in the body, including the regulation of satiety via the brain. Although initially considered as a potential anti-obesity drug, the development of leptin resistance in obesity has limited this perspective so far. Leptin resistance is the process occurring in human obesity and in several models of rodent obesity in which synthesis and secretion of leptin are increased, while inhibition of feeding or activation of energy expenditure by leptin are decreased [2,3]. The underlying mechanisms of this resistance have not been completely elucidated yet.

Leptin’s actions in the brain have been best characterized in the arcuate nucleus of the hypothalamus, where leptin suppresses feeding by acting on leptin receptors on neuropeptide Y (NPY)/Agouti related protein (AgRP) neurons and pro-opiomelanocortin (POMC) neurons. Both NPY and AgRP stimulate feeding, whereas alpha-MSH, which is a product of the POMC gene after splicing, suppresses feeding. Leptin exerts its inhibitory effects on feeding by changing the excitability of the POMC and NPY/AgRP neurons and by increasing and decreasing their expression levels, respectively [4].

Although the emphasis for leptin’s action concerning its effect on feeding behavior has mainly been on the hypothalamus and brainstem [5,6], leptin receptors are more widely spread throughout the central nervous system including the hippocampus and ventral tegmental area (VTA). Within the VTA, leptin receptors are colocalized with tyrosine hydroxylase (TH, a precursor in the synthesis of dopamine) neurons [7–9], which project to the nucleus accumbens and are important for food motivated behavior [10]. Leptin modulates dopamine dependent measures of food and drug reward [8] and has been shown to affect VTA dopamine content [11], firing rate [7] and high fat food preferences [12]. Moreover, leptin-induced changes in TH levels have been observed, although the exact nature of these...
changes remains to be elucidated, as selective up-regulation [8,13] and downregulation [14] of TH levels have been reported.

Previous research showed that rats offered saturated fat and a sugar solution in addition to a chow diet (a free-choice high-fat high-sugar (fcHFHS) choice diet) for only 8 days are peripherally leptin resistant [3]. Peripheral leptin resistance is defined as a lack of feeding suppression upon peripherally (intraperitoneally) injected leptin [3]. The first aim of this study was to investigate whether central administered leptin in rats on a fcHFHS diet would exert an effect on food intake. Since, we did observe food intake inhibition after ICV leptin in rats on a fcHFHS diet comparable to that for rats on CHOW, we next aimed to determine the response to ICV leptin at the gene level in rats on fcHFHS and CHOW diet, focusing on hypothalamic and mesolimbic brain areas.

As leptin did exert effects when injected centrally but not peripherally ([3] and our own unpublished observations), we first focused on leptin’s central effects on arcuate nucleus NPY and POMC expression. As leptin did not affect neuropeptide expression in the arcuate nucleus in rats on the fcHFHS diet but leptin did specifically inhibit chow intake and fat intake, we next focused on the midbrain dopaminergic system as part of the reward pathway and determined TH mRNA levels in the VTA. Additionally, as leptin has been shown to affect nucleus accumbens dopamine flux [13], opioid neurons are influenced by dopamine and fat intake is linked to nucleus accumbens opioid regulation [15], we determined ppENK (precursor for enkephalin) expression in the nucleus accumbens as well.

Methods and Procedures

Animals and Dietary Intervention

Male Wistar rats (Harlan, Horst, the Netherlands) weighing 250–280 g were individually housed in Plexiglas cages in a temperature (21–23 °C) and light-controlled room (lights on 0700–1900). Rats were subjected to either a free-choice high-fat high-sugar diet (fcHFHS) diet or a control diet (CHOW), as has previously been described [16]. The experiments were approved by the Committee for Animal Experimentation of the Academic Medical Center of the University of Amsterdam.

Surgery and Procedure for Intracerebroventricular (ICV) Injections

One week after arrival, all rats were food restricted O/N (as described above) and the next morning (on day 8), rats received ICV injection of 15 μg leptin or vehicle in randomized order and food intake was measured 5 h and 24 h later. In a separate experiment, the effect of leptin on gene expression levels was determined. To allow the first leptin dose (of day 8) to completely fade out, we waited three days after the first experiment. Subsequently, rats were again food restricted on day 11 and received ICV leptin or vehicle on day 12. Between ICV and decapitation two hours later, food was not returned. Decapitation occurred under CO2/O2 and brains were quickly removed and frozen on dry ice and used for in situ hybridization. Individual mesenteric-omental, epididymal, subcutaneous (inguinal) and perirenal white adipose tissues were dissected, cleaned and weighed. Trunk blood was centrifuged and plasma was stored at −20°C. Plasma concentrations of leptin were determined as previously described [17].

In situ Hybridization

Coronal sections (20 μm) were used for radioactive in situ hybridization and sections were obtained according to Paxinos and Watson, 4th edition (1998). Sections were defrosted and fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde (PFA) in phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) for 10 min, washed in PBS, pretreated with 0.25% acetic anhydride in 0.1 M triethanolamine, washed again in PBS and dehydrated in graded ethanol followed by 100% chloroform and 100% ethanol. A 3P-labeled RNA probe (3P-UTP, Perkin Elmer) was made using a 287 bp rat NPY, 350 bp rat POMC, 800 bp rat ppENK or 1200 bp TH cDNA fragment. The sections were hybridized overnight at 72°C with 10 6 cpm probe in buffer containing 50% deionized formamide, 2 x standard saline citrate (SSC), 10% dextran sulphate, 1 × Denhardt’s solution, 5 mM EDTA and 10 mM phosphate buffer, after 5 min heating at 80°C. After hybridization, the sections were washed in 5 × SSC (short, 72°C) and 0.2 × SSC (2 h, 72°C) and dehydrated in graded ethanol in 0.3 M ammonium acetate. Sections were exposed to X-ray film (Kodak Bio-Max MR) for 5 days for POMC and 4 days for NPY, ppENK and TH. The films were developed and expression levels were quantitatively analyzed using an 8800F Canon scanner. All images (600 dpi) were analyzed using ImageJ (Rasband, WS, NIH, Bethesda, MD, USA).

In each section gray values were determined in the region of interest, measured bilaterally and subtracted from background, producing a single value for each brain area on each section.

Statistical Analysis

Data are presented as mean ± standard error of the mean (SEM). The effect of leptin on caloric intake was analyzed using a...
two-way repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with time (5 hour and 24 hour) as within-animal variable and diet (fcHFHS-CHOW) and drug (Leptin-PBS) as between-animal factors. To determine the effects of diet and leptin on gene expression analysis, a two-way ANOVA was performed. Data were analyzed by one-way ANOVA when single outcome measurements or separate time points between the groups were compared. A significant (P<0.05) global effect of the repeated-measurements or one-way ANOVA was followed by post hoc tests for individual group differences (Fisher’s protected least significant difference). Significance was defined at P<0.05.

Results

Body Weight and Feeding Behavior

Rats on the fcHFHS diet were significantly heavier than rats on the CHOW control diet (Table 1, Figure 1a, P<0.05). Average daily total caloric intake in rats on fcHFHS diet was higher than in rats on CHOW diet (Table 1, Figure 1b, P<0.05). There were no significant differences in food intake and body weight between day 8 and day 12.

Effect of Central Leptin on Food Intake after 8 Days fcHFHS or CHOW Diet

We here show effects of leptin administered in the lateral ventricle, thus providing leptin to all brain areas. We started with testing two leptin doses (10 μg and 15 μg) and showed that a dose of 15 μg leptin significantly decreased cumulative chow intake at t = 24 h (P<0.05) (Figure 2). Therefore, in the following experiments the dose of 15 μg leptin was used. This dose is comparable to studies showing ICV leptin administrations for multiple successive days (10 μg for four [18] or five [19] successive days) or leptin’s effects on food intake when applied in third ventricle (3.5 μg [20,21]). As was shown by Smagin et al [22] a five time higher dose as used for third ventricle injection will yield similar effects for lateral ventricle injections. Therefore our dose of 15 μg is in the same range as previous studies.

After 8 days diet exposure to fcHFHS or CHOW diet, the effect of ICV leptin or vehicle on caloric intake after 5 h and 24 h was determined. A two-way repeated-measures ANOVA showed an effect of Time (F(1,25) = 470.4; p<0.01, Diet (F(1,25) = 75.0; P<0.001, and Leptin (F(1,25) = 8.3; P = 0.008, and an interaction of Diet*Time: (F(1,25) = 15.9; P = 0.001 and Leptin*Time: (F(1,25) = 9.1; P = 0.006. No interaction was found for the effect of Diet*Leptin: (F(1,25) = 0.22; P = 0.65, or Leptin*Diet*Time: (F(1,25) = 0.14; P = 0.71. Comparisons within single time point groups showed no effect of leptin on 5 h food intake in CHOW or fcHFHS diet, but leptin did suppress feeding in both CHOW and fcHFHS diet after 24 h (P<0.05, Figure 3A). The degree of inhibition was comparable between rats on the CHOW and fcHFHS diet (−23.1±8.1% vs −19.7±4.5%, P = 0.68).

![Figure 1. Body weight and caloric intake in rats on CHOW or fcHFHS diet. A) Body weight after 12 days CHOW or fcHFHS diet. B) Averaged daily caloric intake in rats on CHOW and fcHFHS diet and absolute amounts of daily total caloric intake of the individual food components chow, sugar solution and saturated fat in rats on a fcHFHS diet. Data are mean ± SEM.](doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0087729.g001)
Figure 2. Determination of effective dose of ICV leptin to suppress feeding. A) The dose of 10 μg leptin did not elicit food intake suppression at any of the time points measured. B) 15 μg leptin significantly suppressed food intake 24 hours after administration. Therefore a dose of 15 μg was used in the following experiments. *P<0.05, vehicle vs. leptin. Data are mean ± SEM.

Figure 3. Effect of leptin ICV on caloric intake in rats on a CHOW and a fcHFHS diet. A) ICV leptin suppressed feeding in rats on a CHOW diet and in rats on a fcHFHS diet 24 hours after ICV leptin administration. B) In the fcHFHS group leptin suppressed intake of the chow and fat component, but not sugar. Data are mean ± SEM; *P<0.05, leptin vs. vehicle.

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As leptin reduced total caloric intake, the effects on the individual food components were calculated (Figure 3B). The anorectic response of leptin was mainly due to the suppression of fat ($P<0.05$) and chow intake ($P<0.05$). Sucrose intake was not significantly affected by leptin. Body weight gain was also reduced 24 hours after ICV leptin ($F(1,25) = 4.49; P = 0.046$ (data not shown)).

Effect of Leptin on Hypothalamic Expression Levels in fcHFHS vs CHOW Diet

In rats on the CHOW diet, leptin significantly decreased NPY mRNA levels in the arcuate nucleus of the hypothalamus ($-29 \pm 5.2\%$; $P<0.05$). In rats of the fcHFHS diet, leptin did not decrease NPY mRNA levels (Figure 4A). Basal NPY mRNA levels were not different between vehicle injected rats on the fcHFHS diet and vehicle injected rats on the CHOW diet.

Basal POMC mRNA levels were not different between vehicle injected rats on the fcHFHS diet and vehicle injected rats on the CHOW diet. Whereas leptin increased POMC mRNA levels in rats on the CHOW diet ($34 \pm 7.8\%$; $P<0.05$), leptin did not change POMC mRNA in rats on the fcHFHS diet (Figure 4B). We found a slight, but non-significant, increase in plasma levels after leptin ICV (data not shown).

Effect of Leptin on Mesolimbic Expression Levels in fcHFHS vs CHOW Diet

Tyrosine hydroxylase (TH) mRNA was measured in the VTA and substantia nigra. In the VTA, leptin had a differential effect on TH mRNA expression in rats on the CHOW and fcHFHS diet. In rats on the CHOW diet leptin decreased TH mRNA ($-30 \pm 3.3\%$; $P<0.01$). In rats on the fcHFHS diet leptin increased TH mRNA ($22 \pm 3.1\%$; $P<0.05$, Figure 5A). Without leptin treatment, TH mRNA in fcHFHS was significantly lower compared to TH mRNA in rats on CHOW. (CHOW-veh vs fcHFHS-veh: $-21 \pm 3.0\%$, $P<0.05$). In the substantia nigra (pars compacta) a similar pattern was observed for TH mRNA, Two-way ANOVA ($Diet \times Leptin$) $P = 0.003$.

![Figure 4. Leptin decreases NPY mRNA and increases POMC mRNA in rats on a CHOW diet, but not in rats on a fcHFHS diet. A) NPY and B) POMC gene expression levels and representative images in the arcuate nucleus of the hypothalamus after ICV dose of vehicle or leptin in rats fed a CHOW or fcHFHS diet. Two-way ANOVA ($Diet \times Leptin$) for NPY $P = 0.035$, for POMC $P = 0.032$. Box represents magnification of the arcuate nucleus gene NPY (a) or POMC (b). Values are means ± SEM of seven to nine rats per group. *$P<0.05$. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0087729.g004](#)
Preproenkephalin (ppENK) mRNA was measured in the nucleus accumbens and dorsal striatum. ppENK mRNA was not affected by leptin in rats on the CHOW diet, but was significantly decreased by leptin in rats on the fcHFHS diet (237.67.8% P<0.05, Figure 5B). In the dorsal striatum, a trend towards a similar pattern was observed for ppENK mRNA, Two-way ANOVA (Diet * Leptin) P = 0.06.

**Discussion**

Although it has been described that rats on a fcHFHS diet do not respond to peripheral leptin after 1 week diet [3], we here show that, at the same point in time, fcHFHS animals do respond to central administration of leptin in a similar fashion as rats on a CHOW diet. In fcHFHS, leptin decreased the chow and fat component and did not affect sucrose intake. Whereas leptin increased POMC and decreased NPY expression in the arcuate nucleus in rats on a CHOW diet, leptin did not exert an effect on these neural populations in rats on the fcHFHS diet. By contrast, in rats on the fcHFHS diet, leptin decreased nucleus accumbens ppENK mRNA and increased VTA TH mRNA; changes that could explain the effect of leptin on chow and fat intake in rats on a fcHFHS diet when administered centrally.

We show that central leptin decreases caloric intake in rats on a fcHFHS diet, whereas peripheral leptin does not, which supports other studies [23,24] and suggests that despite peripheral and arcuate nucleus leptin resistance, other areas in the brain are still leptin responsive. Interestingly, we also show that central leptin decreases both chow and fat intake, but not the sugar solution. This agrees with previous data showing suppression of protein and fat intake, but not carbohydrates, by leptin administration in the third ventricle [25]. The finding that leptin in rats on a fcHFHS diet did not affect arcuate POMC and NPY mRNA expression is in correspondence with studies by Enriori et al. [26] and Munzberg et al. [27] that showed leptin resistance of NPY and AgRP neurons in diet-induced obese mice after peripherally administered leptin. It could well be that the increased peripherally circulating leptin levels in rats on a fcHFHS diet has affected the response of these arcuate nucleus neurons to leptin. Indeed, we...
previously found increased NPY and decreased POMC mRNA levels in rats on the fcHFHS diet accompanied by increased plasma leptin concentrations [16]. This increased NPY and decreased POMC mRNA in rats on a fcHFHS diet was not observed in this study; however, in this study rats were food restricted overnight probably masking effects on NPY and POMC mRNA as these levels respond to fasting [29].

As mRNA expression in the arcuate nucleus was not affected by leptin in rats on a fcHFHS diet, we next determined whether leptin affected other brain areas. Consequently, we focused on the mesolimbic brain area VTA, since dopamine is involved in rewarding aspects of food intake and lep

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partly, account for the leptin-induced feeding suppression in rats on a high-fat diet.

Acknowledgments

We thank Rea van Rozen and Arjen Boender for providing the plasmids for the in situ hybridization experiments.

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Author Contributions

Conceived and designed the experiments: SlF RA AK EF. Performed the experiments: JH LE. Analyzed the data: JH SlF. Wrote the paper: JH SlF RA AK EF.