Paravascular microcirculation facilitates rapid lipid transport and astrocyte signaling in the brain

Vinita Rangroo Thrane1,2,3*, Alexander S. Thrane1,2,3*, Benjamin A. Plog1, Meenakshisundaram Thiagarajan1, Jeffrey J. Iliff1, Rashid Deane1, Erlend A. Nagelhus2,3 & Maiken Nedergaard1

1Division of Glia Disease and Therapeutics, Center for Translational Neuromedicine, Department of Neurosurgery, University of Rochester Medical Center, Rochester, New York 14642, 2Letten Institute of Basic Medical Sciences, University of Oslo, 0317 Oslo, Norway, 3Centre for Molecular Medicine Norway, Nordic EMBL Partnership, University of Oslo, 0318 Oslo, Norway.

In the brain, a paravascular space exists between vascular cells and astroglial end-foot processes, creating a continuous sheath surrounding blood vessels. Using in vivo two-photon imaging we demonstrate that the paravascular circulation facilitates selective transport of small lipophilic molecules, rapid interstitial fluid movement and widespread glial calcium signaling. Depressurizing the paravascular system leads to unselective lipid diffusion, intracellular lipid accumulation and pathological signaling in astrocytes. As the central nervous system is devoid of lymphatic vessels, the paravascular space may serve as a lymphatic equivalent that represents a separate highway for the transport of lipids and signaling molecules.

The brain, unlike other organs, lacks a separate lymphatic system to clear interstitial fluid, transport lipids and facilitate diffusion of signaling molecules. In addition to the neuropil being isolated from the systemic circulation by the blood-brain barrier, the narrow and highly tortuous extracellular space is incompatible with rapid fluid and solute movement1–3. Despite these impediments, the brain has a high interstitial fluid turnover rate that has recently been shown to depend on cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) circulation via the paravascular space4,5. This anatomical space is completely ensheathed by astrocyte endfeet and is well positioned to serve as a highway for glial-glial and glial-vascular communication1,6,7. However, the role of the paravascular space in lipid transport and signal transduction has not been investigated in vivo. Two related questions therefore remain unanswered: can the paravascular space facilitate rapid lipid transport and might this space act as a separate compartment for astrocyte signaling?

Results

To outline the CSF microcirculation, tracers were infused via the cisterna magna (Fig. 1a). Both the fixable lipophilic tracer Texas red hydrazide (TXR, 0.621 kDa) and the hydrophilic tracer tetramethylrhodamine (TMR, 3 kDa) moved rapidly through the brain along cerebral blood vessels (tracer penetration: TXR 12.57 ± 4.41 and TMR 38.71 ± 7.70% brain area at 30 min). Surprisingly, lipophilic tracers of small molecular weight showed as limited parenchymal penetration as large hydrophilic tracers (fluorescein isothiocyanate dextran, FITC, 2000 kDa) in cortical grey matter (tracer penetration 15.56 ± 2.81% brain area) (Fig. 1b, c)4,5.

We used in vivo two-photon laser scanning microscopy (2PLSM) to further explore the highly selective paravascular movement of lipophilic tracers. This restricted movement is unexpected as biologically relevant lipid molecules, such as prostaglandins, cholesterol and palmitic acid, are small (< 1 kDa) and cell permeable6–12. We demonstrated that the movement of small (< 1 kDa) lipophilic tracers was highly selective to the paravascular space (palmitic acid, rhod-2, TXR, sulforhodamine SR101 and Oregon green BAPTA-1 OGB) (Fig. 2a, Supplementary Fig. 1a). Intra-arterial Texas red dextran or FITC were used to morphologically distinguish cortical surface arteries and veins as well as penetrating arterioles and venules (Supplementary Fig. 1a)4. Cross-sectional intensity projections of penetrating arterioles and venules confirmed paravascular tracer selectivity (Fig. 2b). By analyzing regions of interest representing the paravascular space and the surrounding tissue (Fig. 2c), we showed that the lipophilic tracers were rapidly cleared via the paravascular space without gaining access to the surrounding tissue (normalized tracer fluorescence ratio of paravascular space to surround at 60 min: OGB 3.36 ± 0.79,
SR101 3.50 ± 0.88, rhod-2 4.21 ± 1.35) (Fig. 2d). Deletion of the astrocyte water channel aquaporin-4 has recently been shown to slow the circulation of hydrophilic tracers in CSF, but did not affect lipophilic tracer movement (paravascular space to surround ratio in Aqp4−/− at 60 min: 4.83 ± 1.42)4.

We next examined whether lipophilic tracers enter and exit the brain via similar arterio-venous paravascular routes as hydrophilic molecules4. Using NG2-DsRed mice that have fluorescently labeled vascular smooth muscle in arterioles, we showed that the biologically relevant tracer palmitic acid entered via a para-arterial route.

Figure 1 | Rapid paravascular movement of lipophilic tracers. (a) Experimental design for studying tracer (red) movement in paravascular space via cisterna magna. Inset: electron micrograph of penetrating arteriole (PA) with surrounding paravascular space (PVS). Scale bar represents 2.5 μm. (b) Epifluorescence montages illustrate distribution of Texas red hydrazide (TXR), fluorescein isothiocyanate dextran (FITC) and tetramethylrhodamine dextran (TMR). Top insets display auto-thresholded images. Scale bar represents 200 μm. (c) Quantification of brain parenchymal penetration. **P < 0.01, n = 6 animals for all groups, Mann-Whitney U. Data are shown as mean ± SEM.

Figure 2 | Lipophilic tracers selectively enter and exit brain via paravascular space surrounding arterioles and venules. (a) Left: in vivo two-photon image of rhod-2 circulation via the paravascular space in GlT1-eGFP mouse. White circles indicate penetrating arterioles. Surface artery (SA). Scale bar represents 100 μm. Right: high magnification images of the paravascular space surrounding penetrating arteriole at serial depths. (b) Cross sectional intensity traces illustrating the paravascular space (rhod-2, red) and intravascular space (Texas red dextran) around a penetrating arteriole (PA). Endfoot (EF). Scale bar represents 7.5 (top) and 5 (bottom) μm. (c) Region of interest (left) and analysis of tracer intensity (right) in the paravascular space and surrounding parenchyma. Scale bar represents 10 μm. n = 24 arterioles from 7 animals, paired t test. (d) Ratio of lipophilic tracer fluorescence in paravascular space to surrounding parenchyma at 60 min. Sulforhodamine (SR101), Oregon green BAPTA (OGB). n = 11 (OGB), 15 (SR101), 24 (rhod-2) and 12 (Aqp4−/− rhod-2) arterioles from 16 animals (total), unpaired t test. ***P < 0.001. Data are shown as mean ± SEM.
Moreover, using 2PLSM imaging we showed that lipophilic tracer (rhod-2) moved sequentially in the paravascular space surrounding surface arteries, penetrating arterioles, capillaries and venules following cisterna magna infusion (normalized fluorescence of rhod-2 to eGFP expressed under the astrocyte specific Glt1 promoter: 30 min: arteriole 1.90 ± 0.38, capillary 0.45 ± 0.247, venule 0.23 ± 0.172; 60 min: arteriole 2.34 ± 0.44, capillary 0.94 ± 0.21, venule 0.44 ± 0.25; 90 min: arteriole 1.74 ± 0.32, capillary 0.72 ± 0.27, venule 1.33 ± 0.34) (Fig. 2f, g). These observations indicate that lipophilic molecules enter the brain via para-arterial and exit via para-venous routes.

To investigate the consequences of disrupting the paravascular microcirculation, we temporarily depressurized the CSF compartment by puncturing the cisterna magna (CMP) (Fig. 3a). Previous studies have shown that this procedure depletes ventricular and subarachnoid CSF circulation. Using 2PLSM to image paravascular tracer movement we demonstrate that CMP also drains all tracer from the PVS (normalized fluorescence of rhod-2 to eGFP before 4.21 ± 1.35 vs. after CMP 0.24 ± 0.15) (Fig. 3b).

Since the paravascular CSF circulation appears to prevent unspecific lipid diffusion into the brain parenchyma, we next hypothesized that CMP might accelerate lipid tracer accumulation in the parenchyma. We took advantage of astrocyte specific calcium indicators (such as rhod-2), which are lipophilic tracers that become concentrated inside cells due to their acetoxymethyl group. This improved the sensitivity for detecting parenchymal influx. We found that CMP accelerates intracellular accumulation of lipophilic tracer rhod-2, when this was applied to the cortical surface or injected intraparenchymally (eGFP normalized fluorescence of rhod-2 astrocyte labeling intensity at 30 min for sham control: 1.54 ± 0.36 vs. CMP: 4.01 ± 0.57) (Fig. 3c, d). Conversely, Aqp4 deletion, which slows paravascular water movement, did not enhance cellular tracer uptake (Aqp4−/− control at 30 min: 1.56 ± 0.27) (Fig. 3e). Thus, an intact paravascular space restricts lipid diffusion and cellular uptake.

**Figure 3 | Depressurizing the paravascular space impairs lipid transport and astrocyte signaling.** (a) Cisterna magna puncture (CMP) temporarily depressurizes the paravascular space. Lipophilic tracer (rhod-2) was applied to cortical surface or injected into parenchyma to assess tissue influx. (b) Cisterna magna puncture (CMP) drains nearly all paravascular tracer (rhod-2). n = 7 arterioles from 2 animals, Wilcoxon signed ranks test. Scale bar represents 10 μm. (c, d) Two-photon images and quantification of lipid tracer labeling in eGFP expressing cortical astrocytes (circled) following sham control and cisterna magna puncture (CMP). Scale bars represent 75 μm. n = 45 cells from 5 animals for both groups, unpaired t test. (e) Normalized rhod-2 astrocyte labeling intensity. n = 45 (Ctrl), 32 (Aqp4−/−) and 45 (CMP) cells from 14 animals (total), one-way ANOVA. (f) Representative traces of spontaneous calcium activity from cortical astrocytes in awake mice. Synchronized (red) and individual (green) transients. (g, h) CMP increases frequency and reduces synchronization of astrocyte calcium signals. n = 60 (ctrl) and 52 (CMP) cells from 10 animals (total), unpaired t test. (i–k) ATP injection (visualized with FITC-dextran) into the paravascular space stimulates rapid and widespread astrocyte calcium wave spreading outwards from the blood vessel. n = 16 (intraparenchymal, IP) and 9 (paravascular space, PVS) slices from 11 animals (total), unpaired t test. Scale bar represents 40 μm. *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001. Data are shown as mean ± SEM.
To investigate the role of the paravascular space as a signaling compartment, we compared spontaneous astrocyte calcium activity in the cortex of awake mice subjected to CMP or sham surgery. Interestingly, depressurizing the paravascular space caused increased frequency and decreased synchronization of calcium signaling (ctrl 2.21 ± 0.19 vs. CMP 3.08 ± 0.29 mHz cell−1; cell-cell correlation: ctrl 0.69 ± 0.03 vs. CMP 0.60 ± 0.03) (Fig. 3f–h)15. Other aspects of astrocyte signaling were not affected (amplitude: ctrl 39.08 ± 2.10% vs. CMP 39.98 ± 2.18%; duration: ctrl 21.29 ± 1.29 vs. CMP 24.74 ± 1.62 s; P(activate over 15 min): ctrl 75.83 ± 4.20% vs. CMP 7981.05 ± 4.18%) (Supplementary Fig. 1b–d). Astrocyte calcium activity has been shown to propagate along blood vessels and the waves are largely ATP mediated16–19. We therefore inserted a microelectrode and stimulated calcium transients by injecting ATP. The rapid movement of agonist in the paravascular space stimulated a brisk calcium wave spreading outwards from the blood vessel, which propagated faster and over a larger area than when ATP was injected intraparenchymally (wave propagation: parenchyma 4.47 ± 0.56 vs. paravascular space 8.89 ± 1.22 μm s−1; wave diameter: parenchyma 142.86 ± 12.50 vs. paravascular space 315.81 ± 51.42 μm) (Fig. 3i–k).

Discussion
To summarize, we show that the brain has a distinct paravascular compartment for lipid transport and glial signaling within the narrow confines of the neuropil. Lipid transport follows the arteriovenous circulation and is highly selective to the paravascular space. Compromising paravascular transport causes increased intracellular lipid accumulation and abnormal astrocyte calcium signaling. We speculate that lipid transport in the brain may be spatially restricted due to the high concentration of astrocyte-secreted lipoproteins in CSF. Interestingly, lipoprotein mutations are the largest known risk factor for developing Alzheimer disease20,21. Ours and previous data therefore suggest that the paravascular compartment may represent a lymphatic equivalent in the brain that resorbs interstitial fluid, selectively transports small lipid molecules and can act as a signaling highway for coordinated astrocyte communication.

Methods
Animals. Glt-1-eGFP, NG2-DsRed and Atp4−/− mice were generated as outlined previously4,17, and mice of either sex from 6–12 weeks used in conjunction with previously4,17, and mice of either sex from 6–12 weeks used in conjunction with 1) intraperitoneally (i.p.). All animal experiments were approved by the Animal Care and Use Committee of the University of Rochester.

Tracer preparation and intracranial infusion. The hydrophilic tracers fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) dextran (0.5%, 2 kDa) and the lipophilic, cell-permeant tracers palmitic acid isothiocyanate (FITC) dextran (0.5%, 2000 kDa) and tetramethylrhodamine (TMR) dextran (0.5%, 3 kDa) and the lipophilic, cell-permeant tracers palmitic acid were administered intracranially (Fig. 3f–h). The hydrophilic tracers fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) dextran (0.5%, 2 kDa) and the lipophilic, cell-permeant tracers palmitic acid were administered intracranially (Fig. 3f–h). The hydrophilic tracers fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) dextran (0.5%, 2 kDa) and the lipophilic, cell-permeant tracers palmitic acid were administered intracranially (Fig. 3f–h). The hydrophilic tracers fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) dextran (0.5%, 2 kDa) and the lipophilic, cell-permeant tracers palmitic acid were administered intracranially (Fig. 3f–h). The hydrophilic tracers fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) dextran (0.5%, 2 kDa) and the lipophilic, cell-permeant tracers palmitic acid were administered intracranially (Fig. 3f–h). The hydrophilic tracers fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) dextran (0.5%, 2 kDa) and the lipophilic, cell-permeant tracers palmitic acid were administered intracranially (Fig. 3f–h). The hydrophilic tracers fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC) dextran (0.5%, 2 kDa) and the lipophilic, cell-permeant tracers palmitic acid were administered intracranially (Fig. 3f–h).

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**Author contributions**

V.R.T., A.S.T., E.A.N. and M.N. planned the project, prepared figures 1–3 and wrote the main manuscript text. V.R.T. and A.S.T. performed in vivo and in situ experiments. B.P., M.T., J.J.I. and R.D. performed immunohistochemistry and contributed to the manuscript text and figures. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

**Additional information**

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