Contribution of Residues in Second Transmembrane Domain of ASIC1a Protein to Ion Selectivity*

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Marcelo D. Carattino and Margaret C. Della Vecchia

From the Departments of 1Medicine and 6Cell Biology and Physiology, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15261

Background: The mechanisms of ion selectivity and permeation of acid-sensing ion channels are not solved.

Results: Substitutions at selected sites altered cation discrimination.

Conclusion: Ion selectivity is achieved by discrimination of ions on the basis of size and by selective coordination at restricted sites in the pore of ASIC1a.

Significance: Elucidating the mechanisms of ion permeation and selectivity of ASIC1a is important to understand its function and physiological role.

Acid-sensing ion channels (ASICs) are proton-gated cation-selective channels expressed in the peripheral and central nervous systems. The ion permeation pathway of ASIC1a is defined by residues 426–450 in the second transmembrane (TM2) segment. The gate, formed by the intersection of the TM2 segments, localizes near the extracellular boundary of the plasma membrane. We explored the contribution to ion permeation and selectivity of residues in the TM2 segment of ASIC1a. Studies of accessibility with positively charged methanethiosulfonate reagents suggest that the permeation pathway in the open state constricts below the gate, restricting the passage to large ions. Substitution of residues in the intracellular vestibule at positions 437, 438, 443, or 446 significantly increased the permeability to K+ versus Na+. ASIC1a shows a selectivity sequence for alkali metals of Na+ > Li+ > K+ > Rb+ > Cs+. Alanine and cysteine substitutions at position 438 increased, to different extents, the relative permeability to Li+, K+, Rb+, and Cs+. For these mutants, ion permeation was not a function of the diameter of the nonhydrated ion, suggesting that Gly-438 encompasses an ion coordination site that is essential for ion selectivity. M437C and A443C mutants showed slightly increased permeability to K+, Rb+, and Cs+, suggesting that substitutions at these positions influence ion discrimination by altering molecular sieving. Our results indicate that ion selectivity is accomplished by the contribution of multiple sites in the pore of ASIC1a.

The epithelial sodium channel/degenerin (ENaC/DEG) family comprises cation-selective channels with diverse functions in animal physiology (1). The molecular bases of ion permeation and discrimination of these channels are poorly understood. ENaC/DEG channels are organized as homo- or heterotrimers. Each subunit has two transmembrane (TM) segments, a large extracellular region, and intracellular N and C termini. Despite the fact that residues in segments forming the permeation pathway are particularly well conserved among ENaC/DEG subunits, functional studies revealed dramatic differences in terms of ion selectivity between family members. Acid-sensing ion channels (ASICs) are proton-gated members of this family with moderate selectivity toward alkali metals (2–5). These channels are expressed in the central and peripheral nervous systems where they contribute to nociception, mechanosensation, fear-related behavior, and seizure termination (6–8). In contrast, ENaCs are particularly selective for Na+ over K+ with a permeability ratio >100, therefore constituting a selective pathway for Na+ absorption in epithelia (1, 9, 10).

Structural features that allow selective permeation of ions have been defined for tetrameric channels including K+, Ca2+, Na+, and cyclic nucleotide-gated channels (11). K+ channels contain a conserved signature sequence TVGYG in the S5–S6 linker that forms the coordination sites for cations. Four sites for dehydrated K+ ion coordination are defined by the backbone carbonyl groups of TVGYG residues, along with the hydroxyl oxygen of the Thr residue (12). Tetrameric Na+ and Ca2+ channels have modest and high negatively charged residues in the pore, respectively, that comprise the sites for cation coordination (11). The resolved structure of chicken ASIC1 (cASIC1) in the desensitized-like state shows that the pore has an asymmetric hourglass-like shape with the intracellular and extracellular vestibules defined by the intersection of the TM2 helices (13). ENaC/DEG channels do not have negatively charged residues in the TM2 segments that could serve as coordination sites for cations. The permeation pathway of these channels is formed for the most part by nonpolar amino acids. Mutagenesis studies on ENaC ascertained the contribution of residues in the TM2 helices to ion permeation and discrimination and amiloride binding (14–20). The high Na+ selectivity of ENaC has been ascribed to a conserved (G/S)XS tract in the TM2 segment (15–19). Substitutions of the third position dramatically increase the permeability to K+ of ENaC, without a
noticeable effect on Li$^+$ permeability. These studies suggested that ENAC discriminates on the basis of the nonhydrated diameter of the permeating cation and the energy of dehydration (18). Although the selectivity toward alkali metals of ENaCs and ASICs differs considerably, residues in the (G/S)XS tract are mostly conserved. Moreover, ENaCs bearing a ySS41G mutation, which resembles a Gly-X-Ser tract as present in ASIC1a, remain impermeable to K$^+$. Furthermore, ASIC1a is slightly more permeable to Na$^+$ than Li$^+$, which cannot be explained with a model that discriminates ions on the basis of the size of their nonhydrated diameter. Overall, these facts suggest that additional residues in the TM2 segment of ASIC1a contribute to cation selectivity. Here we explore the role of residues in the TM2 segment of ASIC1a to ion permeation and selectivity.

**EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURES**

**Molecular Biology and Oocyte Expression**— Constructs were generated in a mouse ASIC1a (mAASIC1a) template bearing a C70L mutation, as described previously (21). Where indicated, constructs contained a C-terminal hemagglutinin (HA) epitope tag. Site-directed mutagenesis was performed with QuikChange XL (Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, CA) according to the manufacturer’s instructions. Mutations were confirmed by direct sequencing. cRNAs were transcribed using mMESSAGE mMACHINE SP6 (Applied Biosystems, Carlsbad, CA). Oocyte stages 5–6 were isolated from adult female Xenopus laevis (Nasco, Plant City, FL) using a protocol approved by the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee. Oocytes were injected with 0.1–6 ng of cRNA encoding ASIC1a mutants and were maintained at 18 °C in modified Barth’s solution containing (in mM) 88 NaCl, 1 KCl, 2.4 NaHCO₃, 15 HEPES, pH 7.4. Proton-gated currents were elicited with acidic solutions buffered with MES. Oocytes were treated with solutions containing methanethiosulfonate (MTS) reagents at pH 6.5, i.e. channels in a conductive state, or 7.4, i.e. channels in the resting state. The reactivity of the MTS reagents toward the thiolate anion is preferred to that of the protonated form of the thiol group. Consequently, channels were treated with 3 mM or 300 μM MTS at pH 6.5 and 7.4, respectively. MTS reagents were directly dissolved in the recording solutions buffered at pH 7.4 or 6.5 and used within 15 or 30 min of preparation, respectively.

**Data and Statistical Analysis**—Data are expressed as means ± S.E. (n), where n equals the number of independent experiments analyzed. A p value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

**RESULTS**

The structural bases for ion permeation and selectivity of ENaC/DEG channels are largely unresolved. Two atomic structures of cASIC1 in the desensitized-like state are currently available in the PDB: 2QTS and 3HGc. Although both structures show a similar architecture of the extracellular region, the organization of the TM segments presents notable differences (13, 23). 2QTS was resolved from proteins lacking the N and C termini, whereas 3HGc was resolved from proteins (ASIC1mfc) including the intracellular N terminus and a short segment of the C terminus. The ASIC1mfc construct, when expressed in a heterologous expression system, generates proton-gated currents with similar sodium selectivity to wild type (full-length) cASIC1 (13). The transmembrane helices are positioned symmetrically around the long axis of the pore in 3HGc. The gate, defined by the intersection of the TM2 helices, localizes near the extracellular boundary of the plasma membrane. Asp-433, in this atomic structure, outlines the bottom of the extracellular vestibule (Fig. 1). In contrast, the pore of 2QTS presents a breakdown in the molecular three-fold axis of symmetry with a desensitization gate that localizes near the intracellular boundary of the membrane (23). Fig. 1 shows the alignment of residues in the predicted TM2 helices of ENaC subunits, ASIC1a, and brain-liver-intestine Na$^+$ channel (BLI-NaC). Residues in the TM2 segment are well conserved along
ENaC/DEG subunits, suggesting similar pore architecture for members of this family.

Ion Permeation—ASIC1a resides at least in three states, resting, open, and desensitized. Extracellular acidification triggers the transition of the channel from the closed to the open state, which then transitions to the desensitized state. These channels desensitize over a narrow range of pH. At pH values above 7.4, ASIC1a exists in the closed state, whereas at pH values below 7.2, it resides in the desensitized state (21, 24). To define structural changes associated with pore opening, we explored the reactivity of MTSET with channels bearing single Cys mutations in the tract 426–438 at pH 6.5, i.e. channels in a conductive state. MTSET is a membrane-impermeable reagent bearing a positively charged trimethylammonium group with a molecular diameter of ~5.8 Å. We previously found that channels bearing Cys substitutions at positions 426, 427, or 428 are modified by extracellular MTSET at pH 7.0, i.e. channels in the desensitized state, and 7.4, i.e. channels in the resting state (24). Fig. 2A shows a representative recording obtained from an oocyte expressing A427C channels modified by MTSET at pH 6.5, i.e. channels in the open state. MTSET treatment changed the magnitude of the peak current and the steady-state desensitization of this mutant. The effect on steady-state desensitization was partially reversed upon MTSET washout. This suggests that at pH 6.5, MTSET binds to the pore of modified channels, preventing closure of the permeation pathway.

FIGURE 1. Architecture of the pore of ASIC1. A, alignment of the TM2 segments of the ENaC subunits and mASIC1a and brain-liver-intestine Na+/H+ channel (BLINaC) subunits (GenBank™ numbers NP_035454, NP_035455, NP_035456, NP_033727, and NM_021370). Identical residues are highlighted in black with white lettering, whereas conserved residues are indicated in red lettering. B, pore diameter as a function of the longitudinal distance along the pore of cASIC1 (PDB code: 3HGC). Pore dimensions were estimated with MolAxis software. C, geometrical arrangement of residues along the pore of cASIC1. Distances of Ca of residues in the TM1 and TM2 segments to the long axis of the pore of cASIC1 in the desensitized state (PDB code: 3HGC). The numbering of residues corresponds to mASIC1a. cASIC1 and mASIC1a share 72 and 96% amino acid identity in the TM1 and TM2 segments, respectively. D, extracellular view of the pore of cASIC1 (PDB code: 3HGC). Asp-432 (mASIC1a) constitutes the base of the extracellular vestibule. E, key residues identified in this study that affect ion selectivity. Numbering of residues corresponds to mASIC1a.
at positions 432, 434, or 435 were not activated by extracellular acidification and thus could not be assessed. The relative response to extracellular acidification after MTSET treatment was significantly different from controls in oocytes expressing A427C channels in the resting state, and pH 6.5, i.e. channels in a conductive state. Untreated oocytes expressing A427C channels served as controls. The peak current evoked by extracellular acidification after MTSET treatment (or control) was normalized to the peak current evoked by extracellular acidification before treatment. Statistically significant differences are indicated as * (p < 0.05) and ** (p < 0.001) (Kruskal-Wallis test followed by Dunn’s multiple comparisons test).

Opening facilitates the access of MTSEA to the target Cys (Fig. 3). At pH 7.4, the closed gate should prevent the permeation of MTSEA into the intracellular vestibule. Because MTSEA has a pKₐ of 8.5 (25), at neutral pH, a fraction of unprotonated molecules could partition into the membrane environment. In this regard, previous studies indicated that intracellular residues of potassium channels are modified by external MTSEA in the closed state (26, 27). Our observed modification of G438C channels by MTSEA in the resting state (pH 7.4) suggests that this reagent gains access to the target Cys by passive diffusion through the lipid bilayer. In the conductive state, the limited reactivity of residues distal to Gly-431 toward MTSET, but not MTSEA, denotes the presence of a molecular constraint that prevents the permeation of large cations from the extracellular vestibule into the ASIC1a pore.

**Ion Selectivity**—ASIC1a displays moderate selectivity for Na⁺ over K⁺ (2–5). To gain insight into the mechanism of ion selectivity of ASIC1a, we assessed the K⁺/Na⁺ permeability of channels bearing single Cys substitutions in the TM2 segment (Fig. 4). In these studies, control (C70L) or mutant channels expressed in X. laevis oocytes were activated by a drop in extracellular pH from 8.0 to 5.0. The K⁺/Na⁺ permeability was defined as the ratio of the peak current evoked by a drop in extracellular pH in a solution containing K⁺ as the main permeable cation to the peak current evoked by a drop in extracellular pH in a solution containing Na⁺ as the main permeable cation. The K⁺/Na⁺ permeability for controls (C70L) was 0.33 ± 0.02 (n = 13) (Fig. 4), consistent with the K⁺/Na⁺ permeability estimated from single channel studies on lamprey ASIC1 (IASIC1) (K⁺/Na⁺ permeability 0.2) (5, 28). Substitutions at positions 431, 437, 438, 443, and 446 changed significantly the K⁺/Na⁺ permeability of ASIC1a (Fig. 4A). Repetitive
activation by extracellular acidification of some of the mutants assessed in this study resulted in constitutive desensitization to differing extents (Fig. 4B). Several Cys mutants were not activated by a drop in extracellular pH, and therefore, we generated additional substitutions at these sites (Fig. 4, B and C). G434C, G435C, G435A, L439C, G442C, G442A, S444C, S444A, T447C, T447A, E450C, and E450Q channels were not activated by extracellular acidification. Gly-442 and Ser-444 are located at sites analogous to the first and third residues in the conserved (G/S)(G/S) tract of ENaC that contribute to its Na⁺ selectivity (15, 17–19). ENaCs and ASICs bearing substitutions at these sites have reduced activity (15, 18, 19, 28).

ASIC1a is permeable to Na⁺, Li⁺, K⁺ and Rb⁺, but virtually impermeable to Cs⁺ (Fig. 5). Our results showed that substitutions at positions 431, 437, 438, 443 and 446 alter cation discrimination. It is broadly recognized that ion selectivity requires the interaction of ions with surface adsorption sites within the pore of the protein (11). To gain insight into the mechanism of ion selectivity of ASIC1a, we investigated the permeability to alkali metals of M437C, G438C, G438A, A443C, G442C, G442A, S444C, S444A, T447C, T447A, E450C, and E450Q channels (Fig. 5 and Table 1). The permeability (X⁺/Na⁺) as the main permeable cation was normalized to the permeation pathway of ASIC1a metal as the main permeable cation was normalized to the peak current evoked by extracellular acidification with Na⁺ as the main permeable cation. The relative permeability (X⁺/Na⁺) is plotted as a function of the diameter of the nonhydrated cations (n = 8–15).

FIGURE 5. Selectivity of ASIC1a mutants toward alkali metals. The symbols represent relative permeability toward alkali metals of C70L channels (black circles), G438C (white circles), and G438A channels (gray circles). Whole-cell currents were elicited by a change in extracellular pH from 8.0 to 5.0 with solutions containing Na⁺, Li⁺, K⁺, Rb⁺, or Cs⁺ as the main permeable cations. The peak current evoked by extracellular acidification with a defined alkali metal as the main permeable cation was normalized to the peak current evoked by extracellular acidification with Na⁺ as the main permeable cation. The relative permeability (X⁺/Na⁺) is plotted as a function of the diameter of the nonhydrated cations (n = 8–15).

FIGURE 4. Contribution of residues in TM2 segment to ion selectivity. A, representative recordings of proton-activated currents obtained from oocytes expressing ASIC1a mutants. Whole-cell currents were elicited by a change in extracellular pH from 8.0 to 5.0 with Na⁺ or K⁺ as the main permeable cation. B, K⁺/Na⁺ permeability of mutant ASIC1a channels. ASIC1a mutants have a C-terminal HA epitope tag. Whole-cell currents were elicited by a change in extracellular pH from 8.0 to 5.0. The peak current evoked by extracellular acidification with K⁺ as the main permeable cation was normalized to the peak current evoked by extracellular acidification with Na⁺ as the main permeable cation. Currents were normalized by tachyphylaxis (see below). C, tachyphylaxis of ASIC1a mutants. The response to repetitive acid stimulations was determined with Na⁺ as the main permeable cation. ASIC1a mutants were activated by a change in extracellular pH from 8 to 5. Tachyphylaxis is defined as the ratio of the peak currents of two consecutive activations elicited by extracellular acidification (second peak current relative to the first peak current). Statistically significant differences with the control (C70L) are indicated as *, p < 0.05, **, p < 0.01, and +, p < 0.001 (n = 10–43) (Kruskal-Wallis test followed by Dunn’s multiple comparisons test), n.d., not detectable.
the extracellular to the intracellular vestibule of ASIC1a. We found that G438C channels were modified by MTSEA in the resting and open states, but not by MTSET (Fig. 3). The modification of G438C channels by MTSEA was faster at pH 6.5 than 7.4. We conclude that pore opening facilitates MTSEA access to the Cys at position 438. Interestingly, G438C channels were not able to return back to the resting state after MTSEA modification. The MTSEA-modified channels reside in a conductive state at pH 7.4. The differences in reactivity of G438C channels toward MTSEA and MTSET denote the presence of an element between residues 432 and 437 that restricts the diffusion of positively charged molecules based on its size. Substitutions at the homologous position of ASIC1a Gly-438 on the ENaC subunits significantly reduced the apparent affinity for amiloride (29). Moreover, channels bearing Cys mutations at these sites in the α (αS5583Cβ3) and γ (αβγG542C) subunits are irreversibly blocked by MTSET (16, 17). Taken together, these results indicate subtle differences in the pore architecture of ASIC1a and ENaC. Our studies of accessibility with MTS reagents indicate that the permeation pathway in ASIC1a narrows in the open state below the gate (at Asp-433), restricting the passage of large molecules such as MTSET.

Here we explored the contribution of residues in the TM2 segment of ASIC1a to ion selectivity. ASIC1a shows a selectivity sequence toward alkali metal of Na⁺ > Li⁺ > K⁺ > Rb⁺ > Cs⁺. The fact that Li⁺ is less permeable than Na⁺ suggests that permeation is not only a function of the diameter of the nonhydrated ion. Consequently, ion discrimination must necessarily be accomplished by coordination of ions to sites within the pore of the channel. Substitution of residues at positions 431, 437, 438, 443, and 446 changed the selectivity of ASIC1a toward alkali cations. Removal of the primary hydration shell and coordination by polar groups within the permeation pathway are considered the main determinants in ion selectivity (11). The selectivity sequence for alkali metals of ASIC1a is consistent with the Eisenman sequence for equilibrium ion exchange X (30). The energy of the interaction in an Eisenman model for an ion with ion-selective glasses is governed by the dehydration energies, the radius of the anionic binding site, and the cation radius. Eisenman sequence X illustrates a relatively strong interaction between the cation and the coordination site (11).

Channels bearing Cys and Ala substitutions at positions 438 discriminate poorly between alkali metals. G438C channels have a permeability sequence Li⁺ ~ Cs⁺ > Rb⁺ > Na⁺ ~ K⁺. This sequence does not conform to any of the 11 sequences predicted by Eisenman based on ion-selective electrodes (30). Läuger (31) developed a method based on rate theory to calculate transport rates in ion channels using structural data, force constants, and intermolecular energy parameters, which predicted additional sequences for alkali metal cations. The model states that the selectivity of the channel depends on the rigidity of the coordination site, i.e. on the extent to which the interaction with the ion modifies the orientation of the coordination groups. Gly has a high conformational flexibility, which makes it particularly suitable to constitute an ion coordination site. The rates of desensitization and tachyphylaxis of G438C channels were similar to controls, suggesting that this mutation does not significantly alter channel gating. In addition, we found that mutations introduced at a neighboring position, Met-437, also changed the selectivity of the channel toward alkali metal cations. Our results are consistent with Gly-438 constituting a coordination site for alkali metals. It is possible that substitutions at this site or at other sites may indirectly affect ion binding by changing the orientation of neighboring coordination sites. Mutations introduced at the homologous position to Gly-438 on the ENaC subunits reduce the apparent affinity for amiloride (29), consistent with the predicted amiloride binding site at a depth of ~15% within the transmembrane electric field (32, 33). Na⁺ and Li⁺ compete with amiloride in the pore of ENaC, reducing the affinity for its binding site in a voltage-independent manner (34). Although K⁺ itself acts as an ENaC blocker, it also competes with amiloride for the binding site, and this competition is strongly affected by the applied voltage (34). Substitutions at the amiloride binding site on the β and γ ENaC subunits reduced unitary conductance without changing the Li⁺/Na⁺ selectivity of the channel (29, 35). These studies suggest that this site is important for ion coordination in other members of the family.

We identified additional sites in the TM2 segment where substitutions altered the selectivity of the channel toward alkali metals. Gly-431 is located in the outer vestibule of the pore in the desensitized state. Channels bearing Cys mutations at this position presented a lower K⁺/Na⁺ selectivity than controls and enhanced tachyphylaxis. Bulky mutations at homologous sites to Gly-431 on ENaC/DEG channels increase dramatically the open probability (36–40). We hypothesize that the observed increased selectivity of G431C channels toward Na⁺ is a consequence of a change in the structure of the α-helix provoked by the mutation, but not a direct effect on ion coordination. Mutations at two additional sites reduced the selectivity of ASIC1a, position 443, in the (G/S)XS tract, and position 446, one helical turn below. The relative permeability to K⁺, Rb⁺, and Cs⁺ was increased in A443C channels, consistent with Ala-443 being part of or near the putative selectivity filter.

**TABLE 1**

| Subunit | Li⁺/Na⁺ | Na⁺/Na⁺ | K⁺/Na⁺ | Rb⁺/Na⁺ | Cs⁺/Na⁺ |
|---------|---------|---------|--------|--------|--------|
| C70L    | 0.85 ± 0.03 | 1.00 ± 0.04 | 0.33 ± 0.02 | 0.06 ± 0.01 | 0.02 ± 0.01 |
| M437C   | 0.75 ± 0.05 | 1.00 ± 0.02 | 0.49 ± 0.02* | 0.25 ± 0.03 | 0.20 ± 0.03 |
| G438A   | 1.18 ± 0.03* | 1.00 ± 0.02 | 1.29 ± 0.09*** | 0.94 ± 0.03*** | 1.29 ± 0.07*** |
| G438C   | 1.40 ± 0.06*** | 1.00 ± 0.01 | 0.96 ± 0.03*** | 1.23 ± 0.05*** | 1.38 ± 0.05*** |
| A443C   | 0.60 ± 0.04 | 1.00 ± 0.06 | 0.59 ± 0.04** | 0.25 ± 0.03 | 0.25 ± 0.02 |
| L446C   | 1.05 ± 0.03 | 1.00 ± 0.02 | 1.05 ± 0.02*** | 1.04 ± 0.04*** | 1.05 ± 0.04*** |
The increased permeability of A443C to large alkali metals is consistent with previous studies suggesting that the (G/S)XS tract on ENaC acts as a molecular sieve (18). Unfortunately, we were unable to determine the selectivity of channels with mutations at the neighboring residues (442 and 444) as channels bearing mutations at these sites were not functional. We hypothesize that substitutions in all three subunits at position 443 may compromise the functionality of the (G/S)XS tract as a molecular sieve (18). Interestingly, concatameric IAS1C1 bearing a subunit with a Cys substitution at the first position of the (G/S)XS tract has a $K^+/Na^+$ selectivity similar to wild type channels, but a reduced Li$^+/Na^+$ permeability (28). A443C shows enhanced tachyphylaxis when compared with wild type channels, indicating that in addition to changing the selectivity toward alkali metals, this mutation also alters gating. I446C does not discriminate between the alkali metals that we tested. This mutant does not desensitize to the extent observed with wild type channels. Our results suggest that mutations at some sites modify selectivity and gating possibly by disturbing the structure of the pore-lining $\alpha$-helices. Examples of state-dependent changes in ion selectivity in ion channels have been previously reported (11). The Ca atoms of Ala-443 and Leu-446 are positioned at 8.4 and 12.6 Å from the center of the pore in the desensitized state (PDB code: 3HGC), respectively (Fig 1C). To contribute to ion selectivity, residues in the (G/S)XS tract must undergo a considerable movement toward the center of the pore during opening. We have proposed that a rotation of the TM2 segments could widen the closed gate and move toward the center of the pore residues that contribute to ion selectivity in the distal region of the TM2 segments (24).

Our findings suggest that residues in an extended tract, from Met-437 through Leu-446, including the previously described (G/S)XS tract, contribute to discrimination of alkali metals on ASIC1a. We propose that cation selectivity is accomplished by the contribution of multiple sites in the inner pore of ASIC1a.

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