Endocannabinoid-binding CB₁ and TRPV1 receptors as modulators of sperm capacitation

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Addendum to: Barboni B, Bernabò N, Palestini P, Botto L, Pistilli MG, Chiarini M, et al. Type-1 cannabinoid receptors reduce membrane fluidity of capacitated boar sperm by impairing their activation by bicarbonate. PLoS ONE 2011; 6:23038; PMID:21829686; DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0023038.

Mammalian spermatozoa reach the ability to fertilize only after they complete a complex series of physical-chemical modification, the capacitation. Recently, the endocannabinoid-binding type-1 cannabinoid receptor (CB₁) and transient receptor potential vanilloid 1 (TRPV1) channel have been proposed to play a key role in the control of capacitation. In particular CB₁, acting via a Gi protein/cAMP/PKA pathway, maintains low cAMP levels in early stages of post ejaculatory life of male gametes. By this way it promotes the maintenance of membrane stability, thus avoiding the premature fusion of plasma membrane (PM) and outer acrosome membrane (OAM), which is mandatory for the exocytosis of acrosome content. TRPV1, on the contrary, becomes active during the latest stages of capacitation, and allows the rapid increase in intracellular calcium concentration that leads to the removal of the F-actin network interposed between PM and OAM, leading to their fusion and, ultimately, to the acrosome reaction.

Mammalian spermatozoa, immediately after ejaculation, are unable to fertilize the oocytes. In fact, male gametes acquire the full fertilizing competence only after residing for a period that ranges from hours to days (depending on the species), within the female genital tract. Here, after the removal of seminal plasma, a complex series of morpho-functional modifications, collectively known as “capacitation,” occurs due to the interaction of sperm cells with the female environment. The capacitation process is completed when sperm cells become able to recognize the oocyte and to extrude the content of acrosomal vesicle (acrosome reaction, AR), thus penetrating the zona pellucida (ZP) and reaching the oocyte membrane.

Since their discovery in the 50s, the molecular mechanisms involved in capacitation and AR have attracted much attention, with a particular interest on the well-balanced dialog between activating and inhibiting factors that drive the modification of the whole biochemical asset and signal transduction machinery. Recently, it has been proposed that the endocannabinoid system (ECS) could play a key-role in the control of sperm physiology.1-3 In line with this hypothesis, the relevance of ECS in the physiopathology of male reproduction is supported by its conservation along the evolutionary axis, from echinoderm (sea urchin4) to amphibians (frog5) and mammals (mouse,6 bull, boar,2 Human5). Also the finding that the assumption of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the main psychoactive ingredient of cannabis (Cannabis sativa), negatively affects sperm motility, metabolism and fertility,7,8 has further supported this view.

In this context, we have recently proposed that the endocannabinoid-binding type-1 cannabinoid receptor (CB₁)9 and transient receptor potential vanilloid 1 (TRPV1)10 channel could participate in the modulation of spermatozoa maturational (Fig. 1).

In particular CB₁, a Gₐ protein coupled receptor, seems to be involved in an

Key words: endocannabinoid system, type-1cannabinoid receptor (CB₁), transient receptor potential vanilloid 1 (TRPV1), spermatozoa, capacitation

Submitted: 09/16/11
Accepted: 09/16/11
DOI: 10.4161/cib.5.1.18118
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As the spermatozoa progress along the female genital tract, they are gradually exposed to lower concentrations of endocannabinoids and higher concentrations of bicarbonate (oviduct). This condition is associated with the migration of CB₁ receptors in the equatorial region of the sperm, where their activity progressively decreases. The reduced CB₁ activity and the presence of high levels of bicarbonate, which activate a soluble isoform of adenylyl cyclase (sAC), cause a rise in intracellular asymmetrical organization: the amino-phospholipids phosphatidyserine (PS) and phosphatidylethanolamine (PE) are concentrated in the inner leaflet, and the choline phospholipids sphingomyelin (SM) and phosphatidylcholine (PC) in the outer leaflet. This asymmetry is established and maintained by the action of several translocating enzymes with differing phospholipid specificities, the activity of which is modulated by PKA-dependent phosphorylation.

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The transduction signaling machinery is segregated. As a consequence, plasma membrane (PM) and outer acrosome membrane (OAM) progressively increase their ability to fuse with each other (the so called “fusogenicity”), which is mandatory for the completion of AR. A result of this integrated dialog is the promotion of a capacitative status of spermatozoa and the control of the PM and OAM ability to fuse at the right time, thus avoiding lack of responsiveness to ZP and premature loss of acrosome integrity. The latter event can be prevented, during capacitation, by the calcium-dependent polymerization of G-actin, that leads to the formation of an F-actin network that acts as a diaphragm between PM and OAM. This structure has important functions in signal transduction, and acts as a mechanical shelter against the premature fusion of sperm head membranes. Its removal at the right moment (i.e., when the physiological stimulus is received) is controlled by the endocannabinoid/endovanilloid-binding transient receptor potential vanilloid 1 (TRPV1) channel. The latter protein, in fact, is inactive at early stages of capacitation, and is located over the post-equatorial area of the sperm head. As the acquisition of fertilizing ability progresses, TRPV1 translocates from the post-equatorial to the anterior region of the sperm head, thus becoming active. TRPV1 is a non-selective cationic channel, and its activation triggers a membrane depolarization wave and, as a consequence, the opening of voltage-operated calcium channels (VOCC). Then, the subsequent fast elevation of intracellular calcium concentration causes several biochemical events and, particularly, the depolymerization of F-actin and the disappearance of the actin network. At this contact, between PM and OAM, and thus AR, becomes possible.

In conclusion, our present investigation has improved our understanding of the role of the ECS in the complex events leading to sperm-oocyte recognition. In the female genital tract, endocannabinoid-binding receptors seem a crucial element to modulate sperm membrane response to environmental stimuli, and to regulate sperm functioning in a spatio-temporal manner. Besides the possible physiological role of these receptors in controlling sperm acquisition of fertilizing ability, it is tempting to suggest that they may represent a novel platform, on which new diagnostic and therapeutic strategies may be developed to treat male infertility and to improve sperm management and storage.

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