A novel intrinsic analgesic mechanism: the enhancement of the conduction failure along polymodal nociceptive C-fibers

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Abstract

Although conduction failure has been observed in nociceptive C-fibers, little is known regarding its significance or therapeutic potential. In a previous study, we demonstrated that C-fiber conduction failure, which is regarded as an intrinsic self-inhibition mechanism, was reduced in circumstances of painful diabetic neuropathy. In this study, we extend this finding in the complete Freund’s adjuvant model of inflammatory pain and validate that the degree of conduction failure decreased and led to a greater amount of pain signals conveyed to the central nervous system. In complete Freund’s adjuvant–injected animals, conduction failure occurred in a C-fiber-selective, activity-dependent manner and was associated with an increase in the rising slope of the C-fiber after-hyperpolarization potential. To target conduction failure in a therapeutic modality, we used ZD7288, an antagonist of hyperpolarization-activated, cyclic nucleotide–modulated channels which are activated by hyperpolarization and play a pivotal role in both inflammatory and neuropathic pain. ZD7288 promoted conduction failure by suppressing $\beta$, as a mechanism to reduce the rising slope of the after-hyperpolarization potential. Moreover, perineuronal injection of ZD7288 inhibited abnormal mechanical allodynia and thermal hyperalgesia without affecting motor function or heart rate. Our data highlight the analgesic potential of local ZD7288 application and identify conduction failure as a novel target for analgesic therapeutic development.

Keywords: Conduction failure, Nociceptive C-Fiber, HCN, AHP, Pain, Analgesia

1. Introduction

Pharmacological medications for peripheral analgesia, such as local anesthetics and agents targeting the transient receptor potential channel family, are limited by off-target binding and unfavorable side-effect profiles. In clinical trials for these medications, patients have reported numbness, paralysis, and even the loss of autonomic responses. Accordingly, significant efforts have been devoted to the identification of more tolerable and efficacious analgesics as well as methods for the selective blockade of pain signaling.\textsuperscript{3,4} This problem is still far from being solved. Although the regulation of nociceptor activity has received significant attention for decades, very limited work has addressed the transduction process that occurs along polymodal nociceptive fibers. Recently, changes in the fidelity of $\alpha$/$\beta$-fiber conduction were identified in pathological disease states.\textsuperscript{35,38} Furthermore, C-fiber conduction failure was recently observed in painful diabetic neuropathy.\textsuperscript{33} These studies provide evidence for the contribution of transduction alterations to abnormal pain; however, the possible impact of this phenomenon on analgesia has been seldom studied, especially in nociceptive C-fibers.

Axonal conduction failure is a state in which nerve impulses are unsuccessfully transmitted along the axon. It is an unusual operation achieved by axon activity that has been observed experimentally in various axons.\textsuperscript{5,10} Specific to unmyelinated polymodal C-fibers, the classical idea of conduction suggests that signals originating from the periphery are conveyed faithfully along the peripheral main trunk.\textsuperscript{5,18} However, in a recent investigation, we demonstrated the presence of conduction failure (measured as a lack of action potentials along the axon in response to titanic stimulus) in nociceptive C-fibers in a manner that was significantly attenuated under conditions of hyperalgesia. This suggests that conduction failure may serve as an intrinsic self-inhibitory mechanism for the modulation of persistent nociceptive input along nociceptive C-fibers.\textsuperscript{33,42} Targeting the factors involved in conduction failure might therefore represent a new therapeutic target for the treatment of abnormal peripheral pain.

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In the last decade, new findings suggest that hyperpolarization-activated, cyclic nucleotide–modulated (HCN) channels are widely distributed on nociceptors. Increases in current mediated by HCN2 channels ($I_h$) play a pivotal role as a pacemaker for nociceptive signals in both inflammatory and neuropathic pain states. In this study, we investigated the ability of local ZD7288 to decrease signals in both inflammatory and neuropathic pain states. During recording, the ipsilateral coccygeal nerve was exposed at the proximal region of the tail. The nerve filaments were dissected from the intact nerve under warm mineral oil, and the distal ends were placed on a fine platinum electrode for distinguishing and recording polymodal nociceptive C-fiber afferent firings. The stimulus electrode was inserted into the skin of the identified receptive field, stimuli were delivered to the coccygeal nerve, and conduction velocity (CV) was measured. The nerve fibers were categorized based on axon CV as C (<2 m/s), Aδ (2-12 m/s), or Aβ (>12 m/s). To distinguish between a failure to evoke an action potential and a conduction failure, the following steps were carried out. First, to avoid anodal blockade (blockade of impulse propagation induced by repetitive electrical stimuli), the anode electrode was placed at a position distant from the recording site. Moreover, the stimulus intensity used was 120% threshold of the recorded C-fiber. Second, since it is impossible to record from 2 different sites on the same fiber, as the fine filament containing the single fiber must be dissected at the recording location, we arranged 2 pairs of stimulating electrodes along the main nerve trunk with different distances from the recording electrode. Using the same stimulus parameters, a greater degree of conduction failure was observed for longer distance propagation than that in the shorter distance propagation, suggesting failure of the conduction process. The chemicals were applied to a bath located between the stimulus and recording areas to deliver drugs to the axons within nerve trunk. The initial CV (CVi) and CV slowing (CVS) were termed and detected according to the description given previously. The CV of the first evoked action potential was defined as the CVi, and the CVS was calculated by the difference between the first CVi and last CV of a firing train as a percentage of CVi.

2.1. Animals

The animals were obtained from the Animal Center of the Fourth Military Medical University and were handled and cared for in accordance with the Guide for United States Public Health Service’s Policy on Humane Care and Use of Laboratory Animals. The protocol was approved by the Committee on the Ethics of Animal Experiments of the Fourth Military Medical University. All efforts were made to minimize animal suffering and the number of animals used.

2.2. Inflammatory pain model

Subcutaneous injection of complete Freund’s adjuvant (CFA) is a model of inflammatory pain that is primarily mediated by C-fibers; accordingly, we used this model to observe alterations in C-fiber conduction. Complete Freund’s adjuvant (10 μL; Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO) was injected subcutaneously into the distal third of the tail under diethyl ether anesthesia or intradermally into the unilateral hind limb. In the latter model, 2 sites within the cutaneous receptive fields of the L4 and L5 dorsal root ganglia (DRG) were injected simultaneously: one into the plantar surface of the left hind paw and the other into the dermis lateral to the left knee. This induced edema of the entire hind limb as previously described. In imaging experiments, an identical CFA model (into the unilateral hind limb) was used in mice.

2.3. In vivo single-fiber recording

In vivo single-fiber recordings were performed in adult male and female Sprague-Dawley rats (150-200 g). Recordings were obtained from a single polymodal nociceptive C-fiber of the coccygeal nerve. For this procedure, the nerve was exposed at 2 sites. The proximal site was used for single C-fiber recording, and the distal site was used for drug administration to the nerve trunk. The receptive field of the single polymodal nociceptive C-fiber was identified with both mechanical and thermal stimuli as previously described and 2 stimulus electrodes were inserted into the skin for electrical stimulus delivery. When a polymodal nociceptive C-fiber was identified, the degree of conduction failure was measured using repetitive electrical pulse stimuli (1.5 millisecond duration, 120% threshold intensity) in different frequencies (2, 5, and 10 Hz) for 60 seconds. The degree of conduction failure was calculated as the ratio of the number of failures (nonresponses to repetitive stimulus pulses) to the total number of delivered repetitive stimulus pulses multiplied by 100.
2.5. Calcium imaging as a measure of activity of dorsal root ganglion soma

Electrophysiological recording and fluorescence imaging were performed simultaneously in the DRG soma of Thy1-GCaMP3 transgenic mice. Corresponding experiments were carried out in these mice in a self-prepared chamber with 3 baths and preparation of DRG with attached peripheral sciatic nerves. The 3 compartments were isolated both chemically and electrically and connected to the neighboring by either a hole or a groove. After the preparation was mounted, petroleum jelly was used to fill the interspace of either the hole or the groove. Recordings were performed at room temperature in oxygenated artificial cerebrospinal fluid and with normal pipette solution as described above. Cells were recorded in current-clamp mode and repetitive discharges of 5 to 20 Hz (500 μs duration, 1-5 mA intensity) were delivered to the sciatic nerve through the suction electrode to induce action potentials that would propagate towards DRG somata. Imaging was performed using a fluorescence microscope (BX 51W1; Olympus) equipped with a Xenon lamp and a monochromator from Polychrome V (Till Instrument) which is an ultrafast switching monochromator with a fully digital high precision galvanometer-driven grating. Light with a wavelength of 488 nm was used for excitation, and fluorescence was recorded through a band-pass filter of 505 to 525 nm. Images were acquired by using a 40× water-immersion objective with a 5-Hz scanning speed. The average fluorescence intensity in the soma was measured by Metaffluo data processing software and analyzed using MATLAB software. Fluorescence changes over time are reported as \( \Delta F/F = (F - F_b)/(F_0 - F_b) \), in which \( F \) is the raw fluorescence signal, \( F_b \) is the background signal, and \( F_0 \) is the mean fluorescence signal determined during a baseline period prior to the action potential stimulus.\(^5\) For drug application, a segment of the sciatic nerve was isolated in a small liquid bath by mounting at the 2 ends of the nerve.

2.6. Immunofluorescence labeling

On days 3 to 7 after CFA injection, rats were anesthetized with pentobarbital sodium and transcardially perfused with saline followed by 4% paraformaldehyde. Dorsal root ganglia from the lumbar regions of the spinal column and coccygeal nerves were harvested, postfixed overnight in 4% paraformaldehyde, and cryoprotected in 30% sucrose at 4°C until the tissue density exceeded that of the cryoprotection medium. Transverse DRG sections (15 μm thick) and sagittal coccygeal nerve sections (12 μm thick) were cut on a freezing microtome. To visualize HCN channels, double immunofluorescence labeling methods were used. In brief, sections were incubated with a solution containing 0.3% Triton X-100 and 1% bovine serum albumin for 3 hours at room temperature. Sections were then incubated with anti-HCN1 (1:200; Almone Labs, Jerusalem, Israel) or anti-HCN2 (1:200; Almone Labs) and anti-peripherin (1:1000; Sigma-Aldrich) in phosphate-buffered saline containing 0.5% Tween 80 (PBS-T) for 24 hours at 4°C. After 3 washes with PBS-T, sections were incubated with Alexa Fluor 488 and Alexa Fluor 594 secondary antibodies (Molecular Probes) for 2 hours at room temperature. For each animal, 3 sections were randomly selected and imaged with an Olympus confocal microscope. The density threshold was measured by averaging the density of 3 neurons in one section, which was determined to be minimally positive with ImageJ software. All neurons for which the mean density exceeded the threshold >25% were judged to be positive. Positive cells were determined as the percentage of total counted DRG neurons. Only neurons that were positively classified in 2 individual images were categorized to coexpress the 2 target proteins. All images were then processed with Adobe Photoshop software.

2.7. Western blot

Dorsal root ganglia and coccygeal nerves were collected and homogenized in ice-cold lysis buffer containing (in mM): Tris-HCl, pH 7.4, 150 NaCl, 5 EDTA, 1% Triton X-100, 0.5% sodium deoxycholate, 0.1% sodium dodecyl sulphate, and standard protease inhibitors. Insoluble materials were removed by centrifugation (13,000 rpm, 10 minutes), and supernatants were collected for analysis. The protein concentration for each sample was determined by the bicinchoninic acid method using the MICROBCA protein assay kit (Pierce). Proteins were separated on a gel and subsequently transferred to a membrane. Membrane blots were blocked with 10% non-fat dry milk for 12 hours, incubated with primary antibodies (anti-HCN1, 1:100 and anti-HCN2, 1:100) overnight at 4°C and finally incubated with appropriate horseradish peroxidase–conjugated secondary antibody (1:10,000; Amersham Biosciences, Pittsburgh, PA) for 2 hours at room temperature. To normalize the loaded samples, anti-actin antibody (1:5000, GE Healthcare) and an appropriate horseradish peroxidase–conjugated secondary antibody (1: 5000, Pierce) were used to identify β-actin as a loading control. For visualization, membranes were incubated with enhanced chemiluminescence reagents (Pierce), images were acquired with the CHEMLIL-MAGER chemiluminescence imaging system, and bands were analyzed using ImageJ software. The density of each band of interest was measured and normalized to the density of the corresponding β-actin band.

2.8. Animal behavioral testing experiments

Behavioral experiments were conducted in a blinded fashion (ie, the experimenter was unaware of the experimental conditions). Mechanical allodynia and thermal hyperalgesia were measured...
as previously described. In brief, rats were placed in suspended individual chambers with mesh flooring and allowed to acclimate for 30 minutes. A series of calibrated von Frey filaments were applied perpendicularly to the central region of the glabrous surface of the hind paw in the order of increasing bending force from 0.6 to 26 g (Stoelting, Wood Dale, IL) for 5 seconds each and with 15-second intervals. Brisk withdrawal or pain flinching was considered to indicate a positive response. The threshold was defined as the force eliciting a 50% withdrawal. To measure thermal sensitivity, the latency for paw withdrawal from a radiating heat source with an automated device readout was measured (IIIC Life Science Inc, Woodland Hills, CA). The time course (from 3 days before to 15 days after CFA injection) for the development of and recovery from CFA-induced mechanical allodynia and thermal hyperalgesia is provided (Supplementary Fig. 1, available online at http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A283). A stable allodynia and hyperalgesia during the 3 to 7 days after CFA injection was observed. Corresponding electrophysiological and immunofluorescence labeling experiments were performed within this period.

During the abovementioned assessments, motor function of the involved leg was assessed every 15 minutes as previously described; in brief, animals were scored as follows: 2, full paralysis; 1, partial paralysis; 0, no impairment. For drug administration, sciatic perineuronal injections were carried out as previously described. In brief, the ischial tuberosity and the greater trochanter were localized by palpation. On an imaginary line between these 2 landmarks and about one-third of the distance caudal to the greater trochanter, a 27-G needle was advanced at a 45° angle from dorsal lateral direction until the tip encountered the ischium. Then a 200 μL volume of either ZD7288 or saline was injected.

Furthermore, in the formalin test, the late phase was considered to be related to the activity of C-fibers. The mean time spent on behaviors was 0 to 10 minutes for the early phase and 15 to 60 minutes for the late phase.

2.9. Statistics

Data are presented as the mean ± SEM and were analyzed using either an analysis of variance or a 2-tailed Student t test. The level of significance was set at P < 0.05.

3. Results

3.1. ZD7288 enhances the degree of conduction failure in nociceptive C-fibers under an inflammatory condition

All of the following investigations were based on the assumption that conduction failure is a common occurrence along nociceptive C-fibers, which is supported by the results of our previous investigations. Whereas C-fiber conduction failure can be observed in normal animals, decreases in conduction failure occur under conditions of notable hyperalgesia, such as painful diabetic neuropathy. In this study, further investigations in an inflammatory pain model were carried out. After the establishment of CFA-induced mechanical allodynia and thermal hyperalgesia, we recorded activity from single polymodal nociceptive C-fibers of the coccygeal nerve activated by a stimulating electrode positioned over the receptive field (Supplemental Fig. 2A, available online at http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A283). After CFA injection into the tail, the degree of frequency-dependent conduction failure was reduced significantly relative to control (Supplemental Figs. 2B–D, available online at http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A283). These data suggest that the conduction failure of pain-relevant polymodal nociceptive C-fibers is attenuated in the CFA model of inflammatory pain.

We next examined the effect of local ZD7288 administration on attenuated polymodal nociceptive C-fiber conduction failure in the CFA model. ZD7288 dose-dependently increased CVS and the degree of conduction failure in CFA model rats (Fig. 1A). We also observed a dose-dependent increase in the dispersion of interspike interval (ISI) series distributions (Fig. 1A, bottom). Furthermore, spontaneous firing activity is considered to be a surrogate indicator of spontaneous pain and was observed in 20% of polymodal nociceptive C-fibers in CFA model rats. The application of ZD7288 decreased this spontaneous firing activity in a dose-dependent manner (Supplemental Fig. 3, available online at http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A283), indicating a potential effect on spontaneous pain.

The effect of ZD7288 on conduction failure had 2 distinct features. One feature was activity dependence, ie, higher frequencies of afferent signaling uncovered greater effects of ZD7288 on the degree of conduction failure (Fig. 1B). The second feature was the dependence on the type of nerve fiber. After application of 150 μM ZD7288 to the nerve trunk, the degree of both CVS and conduction failure increased in C-fibers, while little-to-no effect was observed in A-fibers (Fig. 1C). Furthermore, ZD7288 had no effect on A-fibers at a dose range of 50 to 250 μM in response to stimulus frequencies below 20 Hz (0 of 23 fibers, 19 Aβ fibers, and 4 Aδ fibers).

3.2. ZD7288 selectively enhances conduction failure at the level of the dorsal root ganglia

To further confirm the selectivity of the effect of ZD7288 on C-fiber conduction failure in primary sensory neurons, conduction failure was evaluated using fluorescent imaging of DRG neurons from Thy1-GCaMP3 transgenic mice. This experiment was based on the idea that genetically encoded calcium indicators are a powerful tool for mapping neuronal activity without causing significant neuronal damage. For these studies, we used a preparation of DRG with attached peripheral nerves (Fig. 2A). First, we confirmed the expression of GCaMP protein in the DRG somata of both small-(<20 μm) and large- (>50 μm) diameter neurons. We then performed whole-cell patch recording and imaged changes in fluorescence simultaneously. A single action potential evoked detectable calcium transients with average ΔF/F amplitudes of 5% (Fig. 2B). Moreover, the amplitude of fluorescence changes correlated well with the number of observed spikes (Fig. 2C).

Following these baseline studies, the effect of ZD7288 was examined. During the electrical stimulation of afferent nerves (5 Hz for 40 seconds), both small-diameter and large-diameter neurons in the DRG exhibited rapid increases in fluorescence intensity. Administration of ZD7288 (50 μM) to the nerve trunk (Fig. 2A) produced a remarkable decrease in the peak fluorescence intensity of small-diameter neurons (peak value 54.6 ± 16.9%, n = 20) but had little-to-no effect on large-diameter neurons (17.1 ± 6.2%, n = 27; Fig. 2D). These results demonstrate that local application of ZD7288 to afferent nerves selectively enhances the degree of conduction failure in nociceptive small-diameter neurons, but not in large-diameter neurons.

3.3. ZD7288 promotes conduction failure by reducing the rising slope of the after-hyperpolarization potential in small-diameter dorsal root ganglion neurons

We next investigated the mechanism of ZD7288-mediated conduction failure. At present, it is technically difficult to directly patch clamp C-fibers; therefore, we measured the relationship between conduction failure and changes in membrane potential.
Figure 1. Effects of ZD7288 on conduction failure of C-fibers in CFA model. (A) Upper left 2 panels: ZD7288 application (40 μM, Post-ZD) enhanced conduction failure in polymodal C-fiber relative to control (Pre-ZD). Every 20th sweep is shown (consecutive sweeps were at 2-second intervals) and is displayed top-to-bottom (similar as below). Upper right: Dose–response histograms for the effect of ZD7288 on conduction failure (n = 12). Bottom: representative change in the inter-spike interval (ISI) during repetitive stimulation before and after ZD7288 application. (1) ISI from a series of discharges evoked by 10-Hz repetitive stimulation of a single C-fiber from a complete Freund’s adjuvant— injected rat. Increase and scatter of ISI series started at about 45 seconds, indicating conduction failure has occurred. (2-4) Change of ISI for the same C-fiber after the application of varying concentrations of ZD7288 (10 μM, 20 μM, or 40 μM), note the earlier appearance of the ISI series change along with the increase of the concentration of ZD7288, indicating that the degree of conduction failure was enhanced in a concentration-dependent manner. (B) (1) original consecutive recordings of single C-fiber activity in response to electrical stimulation (2 Hz) of the receptive field before (left) and after (right) ZD7288 application (40 μM). (2) The same recordings performed in response to 5-Hz stimulation. (3) The same recordings performed in response to 10-Hz stimulation. (4) ZD7288 enhanced the conduction failure of C-fibers in an activity-dependent manner (n = 8). (C) ZD7288 selectively enhanced the conduction failure on polymodal C-fiber (with longer latency) but not on A-fiber activity (with shorter latency). *P < 0.05 vs control.
for small-diameter DRG neurons. In this study, conduction failure was reflected by spike failure in response to repetitive stimulus pulses. We focused on the AHP because it is noticed that some thin axons became hyperpolarized when the spike activity exceeded 1 to 5 Hz. In response to single pulse stimulation, the 80% AHP recovery time in small-diameter neurons (149.2 ± 12.6 millisecond, n = 26) was significantly longer than that in large-diameter neurons (17.0 ± 2.2 millisecond, n = 10) (Figs. 3A and C). Following repeated stimuli at a lower frequency (5 Hz), the 80% AHP recovery time measured from the last spike of the stimulus series was significantly prolonged in small-diameter DRG neurons according to the spike number (Figs. 3B and D). Further examination revealed that, within the stimulus series, spikes in response to repetitive stimuli could pile up on the previous AHP and led to a reduction in the rising slope of the following AHP (Figs. 3E and F). Therefore, the observed reduction in the rising slope of the AHP primarily reflected the prolongation of the AHP within the repetitive firing instead of 80% AHP recovery time. This

Figure 2. C-fiber conduction failure at the level of the DRG in Thy1-GCaMP3 transgenic mice. (A) The experimental scheme for simultaneous patch-clamp recording and fluorescence imaging of DRG. Dorsal root ganglia with attached peripheral sciatic nerves were prepared. There were 3 isolated baths: one for DRG perfusion, one for ZD7288 application, and one for electrical stimulation of the sciatic nerve with a suction electrode. (B) Representative ΔF/F traces (red) for different numbers of action potentials across large-diameter (left panel) and small-diameter (right panel) DRG neurons from Thy1-GCaMP3 mice. Insets show the evoked spikes for each cell. (C) Fluorescence responses increased in tandem with increases in the number of spikes for both large-diameter and small-diameter DRG neurons (n = 9). (D) Fluorescence change as a surrogate for conduction failure was measured in 2 large-diameter and 2 small-diameter DRG neurons via stimulation with 200 spikes (5 Hz, 40-second duration). Upper: fluorescent images of the baseline response (Pre-ST), the response to stimulation (Dur-ST), and the difference between the Pre-ST and Dur-ST responses (Dur-ST minus Pre-ST), respectively. Minor fluorescence changes were observed in large- (3, 4) vs small- (1, 2) diameter DRG neurons before (middle images and traces) and after (bottom images and traces) ZD7288 application. The color image was obtained at the time point marked by the vertical dashed line in the left panel trace. DRG, dorsal root ganglion; RE, recording electrode; SE, stimulation electrode; FM, fluorescence microscope; SN, sciatic nerve.
Figure 3. ZD7288 enhances the conduction failure of small-diameter DRG neurons by decreasing the rising slope of the AHP. (A) Traces demonstrating representative AHPs for large-diameter (left) and small-diameter (right) DRG neurons in response to peripheral sciatic nerve stimulation. The conduction velocity of each neuron was calculated from the latency (21.43 and 0.33 m/s for large- and small-diameter neurons, respectively). (B) Change in AHP for the last spike in response to repetitive stimulation (5 Hz) in large-diameter (left panel) and small-diameter DRG neurons (right panel). The AHP of small-diameter neurons was prolonged in a manner proportional to stimulation. (C) Scatter plot showing the distribution of 80% AHP recovery times for large- and small-diameter DRG neurons. The average time is marked by a dotted line for small-diameter neurons and by a solid line for large-diameter neurons. (D) Statistical comparison of 80% AHP recovery times for large- and small-diameter DRG neurons. (E) Continuous recordings of series firing responses to 5-Hz stimulation under control conditions or in the presence of varying concentrations of ZD7288 in a small-diameter DRG neuron from a complete Freund’s adjuvant–injected rat. Insets show expanded traces for the specified intervals. Dark spots represent spike failures. (F) Representative traces used to measure the rising slope of the AHP. The rising slope was equal to the amplitude difference between the maximum and minimum AHP voltages (mV) divided by duration (interval of stimuli, in seconds). The left panel illustrates a larger rising slope (from the first trace in panel E marked with “*”), and the right panel shows a smaller rising slope (from the fourth trace in panel E marked with “#”) after ZD7288 application (125 μM). (G) Relationship between the degree of conduction failure and the rising slope of the AHP in response to different concentrations of ZD7288 (n = 4). * and #P < 0.05 vs control. AHP, after-hyperpolarization potential.
was consistent with the fact that after repeated intracellular short-pulse stimulation (a train of 200 pulses, 5 Hz, 1-2.5 millisecond duration, 120% threshold), the rising slope declined from 41.42 to 30.25 mV/s (Fig. 3E, first trace). Using this parameter, we uncovered a negative correlation between spike failure and AHP alteration within the repetitive activities (Fig. 3G). Of note, these effects in response to lower frequency stimulation were not observed in large-diameter neurons (Fig. 3B).

Next, we examined the effect of ZD7288 on spike failure. After the local application of different concentrations of ZD7288, 2 results were observed (Fig. 3E). In the first result, 3 types of spike failure occurred: (1) one in which the failure appeared sporadically; (2) one in which firing and failure appeared alternately, and failure always presented at the point of greater hyperpolarization; and (3) one in which several failures appeared continuously at time points with a smaller rising slope of the AHP or a greater hyperpolarization potential. The second result was that activity-dependent decreases in the rising slope of the AHP were further reduced from 20.80 ± 2.01 to 14.99 ± 1.51 mV/S and was accompanied by an enhanced degree of spike failure (Figs. 3E and G). These results suggest that a reduction in $I_h$ is correlated with the decrease of the rising slope of the AHP and then led to the augmentation of spike failure. These results might partially reveal the dynamic relationship between the conduction failure and the changes in AHP along nociceptive C-fibers. While, in large-diameter DRG neurons (>$50 \mu m$), repeated stimulation between 5 to 50 Hz did not evoke any piling up of the AHP because of its short-duration property. So, even with a relative larger $I_h$ current density compared with those in small-diameter DRG neurons of CFA-injected animals (Supplemental Figs. 4C and D and Fig. 5C, available online at http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A283), the only changes were the hyperpolarization of the membrane potential ($-60.1 \pm 5.4$ mV vs $-64.0 \pm 6.1$ mV) and thus a decreased AHP amplitude ($9.2 \pm 1.7$ mV vs $5.4 \pm 1.8$ mV, $n = 12$) in response to the ZD7288 application, but no change of the conduction failure (Supplemental Figs. 4A and B, available online at http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A283).

3.4. Alterations in ionic channel function underlie the effect of ZD7288 on C-fiber conduction

Given the significant effect of ZD7288 on the conduction failure of nociceptive C-fibers as well as on the AHP activity of small-diameter DRG neurons in CFA model animals, we next examined the expression of HCN channels in the coccygeal nerve and on DRG soma. We first evaluated HCN2 as it has been explored as an analgesic therapeutic target in a variety of animal models. As expected, the expression of HCN2 was increased in both the coccygeal nerve and small DRG neurons in CFA-injected rats relative to control rats (Figs. 4A and G). Confocal analysis of the double immunofluorescence revealed that the intensity of HCN2 immunoreactivity and the percentage of HCN2-positive cells were significantly increased in CFA-injected rats (Figs. 4B and D). Furthermore, Western blottings...
showed that expressions of HCN2 were also significantly increased in DRG and coccygeal nerves derived from CFA-injected rats compared with control rats (Figs. 4E and F). Similarly, increased expression of HCN1 channels was also found in the CFA-injected coccygeal nerve and DRG small neurons compared with the control group (Supplemental Fig. 5, available online at http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A283). These changes in expression highlight a possible target for the action of ZD7288. In agreement with HCN2 as a hypothesized target, the sag component and amplitude of $I_h$ current were increased in DRG small-diameter neurons isolated from CFA-injected rats, and this effect was inhibited by the application of ZD7288 (Fig. 5).

3.5. Perineuronal injection of ZD7288 ameliorates inflammatory pain behaviors

Considering the effects of ZD7288 on the conduction failure of nociceptive C-fibers, we next evaluated the impact of local (perisciatic) injection of ZD7288 on CFA- and formalin-evoked pain behaviors in rats. ZD7288 significantly alleviated mechanical allodynia and thermal hyperalgesia in a dose-dependent manner (Fig. 6A). Furthermore, ZD7288 showed efficacy in the late phase but not the early phase of the formalin test (Fig. 6B), indicating that ZD7288 selectively inhibited the nociceptive activity of C-fibers in response to inflammatory pain.

As an analgesic agent, ZD7288 is limited by the side effects associated with systemic delivery.$^4,23$ Of note, a significant analgesic effect was achieved without motor deficits after the perineuronal injection of ZD7288 (up to 500 μM) (Fig. 6C), whereas perineuronal injection of lidocaine (0.2% or 2%) produced motor deficits in accordance with previous reports.$^3$ Intraperitoneal injection of ZD7288 (4 mg/kg) led to bradycardia (a reduction in heart rate from 300 to 200 beats/min) (Fig. 6D), consistent with the reported side effects after the intravenous injection of ZD7288.$^4,23$ In contrast, perineuronal injection (up to 500 μM) had no significant effects on cardiac rhythm (Fig. 6D). These results show that perineuronal injection of ZD7288 produces a reversal of mechanical allodynia and thermal hyperalgesia in the absence of observable bradycardia or motor deficits.

Figure 5. Complete Freund's adjuvant (CFA)-induced inflammation increases the hyperpolarization-activated cation current ($I_h$) in small-diameter DRG neurons. (A) Voltage sag of the membrane potential evoked by a series of hyperpolarizing current injections in small-diameter DRG neurons. (B) Representative $I_h$ traces evoked by a series of hyperpolarizing voltage steps (bottom panel) from a holding potential of −260 to −130 mV for 6 seconds in 10 mV increments. (C) The mean current density of $I_h$ in small-diameter DRG neurons from control and CFA-injected rats ($n = 12$). * $P < 0.05$ vs the control group.
4. Discussion

The present investigation validates the results of a previous study reporting conduction failure along the main axon trunk of polymodal nociceptive C-fibers. One of the fundamental features of conduction failure as observed in our study was activity- or frequency-dependence, such that higher stimulation frequencies produced greater degrees of conduction failure. It follows that higher intensity pain stimuli might also produce greater degrees of conduction failure as an intrinsic mechanism for modulating nociceptive input. Under nonpathological circumstances, such an intrinsic self-inhibitory mechanism would serve to limit the extent of nociceptive signal propagation to the

Figure 6. Perineuronal injection of ZD7288 alleviates pain behaviors in the absence of significant motor and cardiovascular side effects. (A) ZD7288 attenuated CFA-induced mechanical allodynia (left) and thermal hyperalgesia (right) in a dose-dependent and reversible manner (n = 15). In each figure, 3 days after CFA injection (the detection of mechanical threshold/paw withdrawal latency was indicated as Pre), rats received equivalent volumes of perineuronal saline or ZD7288 with different concentrations after baseline assessment of tactile allodynia or hyperalgesia (indicated as Base). (B) Left: ZD7288 attenuated formalin-induced spontaneous flinching behaviors in a dose-dependent and reversible manner. Right: quantitative analysis of the effect of ZD7288 on spontaneous pain behaviors in the early and late phases of the formalin test (n = 6). (C) Comparison of the effects of perineuronal lidocaine (0.2% or 2%) and ZD7288 (500 μM) on motor function (n = 6). (D) Left: original heart rate recordings from rats after perineuronal saline injection (IPN + NS, top trace), perineuronal ZD7288 injection (500 μM, IPN + ZD, middle trace), or intraperitoneal ZD7288 injection (4 mg/kg, IP + ZD, lower trace) (n = 5). Right: quantitative analysis of the heart rate results shown in panel D. *P < 0.05 vs the control group. CFA, complete Freund's adjuvant. IPN, perineuronal injection; NS, saline; ZD, ZD7288.
Based on our observations, such high frequency and T-type Ca mechanism that underlies the current density and the expression of current in the observed cells. Conversely, much shorter block other currents to AHP, conduction failure. In our study, and A, and D as well as in the present situation. Future validation of the key HCN isoforms underlying conduction failure would support a causal link between HCN channels and conduction failure.

The selective action of ZD7288 on the AHP of small-diameter DRG neurons and thus C-fiber conduction failure has the potential to provide an experimental foundation for the development of a new type of peripheral analgesic therapy that (1) selectively suppresses nociceptive afferent inputs, (2) produced minimal side effects, and (3) is safe and convenient for patient use. Injection of ZD7288 perineuronally is such an operation. In this study, using HCN blockers does not affect the first phase of formalin pain but the second phase, which is supported by Young’s investigation. Though, this study further demonstrated that perineuronal injection of ZD7288 significantly inhibited both.
mechanical and heat hyperalgesia without influencing heart and motor function. This kind of analgesic therapy may be suitable for the treatment of abnormal peripheral pain states, especially those affecting the limbs. Future work should more seriously evaluate the potential therapeutic utility of targeting intrinsic conduction failure as an analgesic mechanism.

Conflict of interest statement
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Appendix A. Supplemental Digital Content
Supplemental Digital Content associated with this article can be found online at http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A283.

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