1991

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Peter F. Blackmore

Joseph Neulan

Frank Lattanzio

Stephen J. Beebe

Old Dominion University, sbeebe@odu.edu

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Cell Surface-binding Sites for Progesterone Mediate Calcium Uptake in Human Sperm*  

(Received for publication, November 19, 1990)  

Peter F. Blackmore‡§, Joseph Neulenn¶, Frank Lattanzio‡, and Stephen J. Beebe†  

From the ‡Department of Pharmacology, the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and the ¶Jones Institute for Reproductive Medicine, Eastern Virginia Medical School, Norfolk, Virginia 23501  


In this study, the location of progesterone receptors on the cell surface of human sperm was identified using progesterone immobilized on bovine serum albumin (BSA) (progesterone 3-(O-carboxymethyl)oxime:BSA) as well as progesterone and its 3-O-carboxymethylxiloxime derivative. Using fluorescence microscopy, BSA-fluorescein isothiocyanate was shown to be excluded from intact sperm, thus validating the use of progesterone 3-(O-carboxymethyl)oxime:BSA to identify cell surface-binding sites for progesterone. The immobilized progesterone and the 3-O-carboxymethylxiloxime derivative rapidly increased [Ca2+]i, and were full agonists, although they were approximately 1.5 orders of magnitude less potent than progesterone. They also displayed an identical time course to increase [Ca2+]i as free progesterone, and the entire increase in [Ca2+]i was due to the influx of Ca2+. This progesterone-mediated response displayed different steroid receptor characteristics since the very potent inhibitors of genomic progesterone responses, RU38486 and ZK98.299, were very ineffective at inhibiting the progesterone-mediated increase in [Ca2+]i. Also the synthetic progesterone megistanol, medroxyprogesterone acetate, norgestrel, norethynodrel, norethindrone, R5020, and cyproterone acetate did not mimic the effects of progesterone to increase [Ca2+]i. It is proposed that a distinct nongenomic cell surface receptor for progesterone exists in human sperm.  

* The laboratories of Peter F. Blackmore and Frank Lattanzio were supported by grants from Upjohn, Pfizer, Juvenile Diabetes Foundation International, Edmondson Cancer Fund, and the Eastern Virginia Medical School Foundation. The laboratory of Stephen Beebe was supported by grants from the Eastern Virginia Medical school Foundation, The Jefferson Memorial Trust, and the Children’s Hospital of the Kings Daughters Fund. A preliminary account of this work was presented at the 75th Annual Meeting of the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology, April 21–25, 1991 (Blackmore et al., 1991). The costs of publication of this article were defrayed in part by the payment of page charges. This article must therefore be hereby marked “advertisement” in accordance with 18 U.S.C. Section 1734 solely to indicate this fact.  

† To whom correspondence should be addressed: Dept. of Pharmacology, Eastern Virginia Medical School, P.O. Box 1880, Norfolk, VA 23501.  

§ Present address: Universitäts Frauenklinik Freiburg, W-7800 Freiburg, F.R.G.  

Studies have shown that progesterone can induce the acrosome reaction in capacitated human sperm (Osman et al., 1989). It has also been demonstrated that progesterone and 17α-hydroxyprogesterone can induce a rapid influx of Ca2+ into either capacitated or noncapacitated human sperm (Blackmore et al., 1990; Thomas and Meizel, 1989). The induction of the acrosome reaction is believed to follow this influx of Ca2+ (e.g. Yauagimachi, 1988; Sidhu and Guraya, 1990). This rapid effect of progesterone to stimulate Ca2+ influx indicates a nongenomic response and suggests that a cell surface receptor exists for progesterone (Blackmore et al., 1990). Since progesterone can penetrate the plasma membrane, due to its hydrophobicity, one could envisage that the binding site for progesterone could conceivably be located intracellularly.  

The best characterized cell surface progesterone receptor is from the Xenopus oocyte (Sadler and Maller, 1985), where progesterone reduces endogenous cAMP levels by inhibiting adenylcyclase. There are other more recent reports of nongenomic effects of steroids. For example, progesterone causes the release of gonadotropin-releasing hormone from rat hypothalamus via a plasma membrane receptor (Ke and Ramirez, 1987, 1990). Progesterone was also shown to enhance γ-aminobutyric acid effects on neuronal Cl− ion channels (Wu et al., 1990). The present evidence shows that progesterone as well as other steroids bind to a “distinct membrane-bound steroid site” (Gee et al., 1987; Lan et al., 1989). The rapid membrane effects of steroid hormones were recently reviewed by Schumacher (1990), Touchette (1990), and McEwen (1991).  

To investigate the mechanism by which the progesterone receptor can regulate the uptake of Ca2+ by sperm and increase [Ca2+], it is imperative that the subcellular location of the progesterone receptor be identified. If it is suspected that the receptor is in the plasma membrane and the binding site for progesterone is on the extracellular surface, then use can be made of immobilized progesterone. Immobilized ligands, if coupled to large molecular weight molecules that cannot penetrate the plasma membrane and if the essential determinants for the ligands specificity and activity are still exposed, can stimulate cell surface receptors (e.g. Deyhavs et al., 1980). In the present study, we utilized progesterone (prog) covalently linked at position 3 on the steroid nucleus via an O-carboxymethylxiloxime (CMO) to bovine serum albumin (BSA) (prog CMO BSA). It was found that prog CMO BSA was able to stimulate a rapid increase in [Ca2+].  

1 The abbreviations used are: prog, progesterone; CMO, O-carboxymethylxiloxime; BSA, bovine serum albumin; FITC-BSA, bovine serum albumin-fluorescein isothiocyanate; EGTA, [ethylenebis(oxymethylene)tetraacetic acid.  

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MATERIALS AND METHODS

Human sperm, either capacitated or noncapacitated, were isolated as previously described (Blackmore et al., 1990). The same results were obtained with either sperm preparation (data not shown). Sperm were loaded with fura-2 and fluorescence measurements made as detailed before (Blackmore et al., 1990). Prog CMO BSA, BSA-fluorescein isothiocyanate (FITC-BSA), and Prog CMO were from Sigma. The particular preparation of prog CMO BSA had 31 mol of progesterone/mol of BSA. RU38486 was from Roussel-Uclaf, France, and ZK98-299 was from Schering AG (F.R.G.). Other steroids were from Sigma.

Free progesterone was removed from various solutions as follows. A solution (100 μl) of prog CMO BSA (100 μM) was incubated at room temperature with a slurry (20 μl) of activated charcoal (charcoal 0.5 g/ml, BSA 4 mg/ml). After removal of the charcoal by centrifugation (2000 X g for 5 min), the supernatant solution should only contain progesterone covalently bound to BSA (see Fig. 6 for results). To confirm that charcoal did remove free progesterone and CMO progesterone from aqueous solution, charcoal was added, as above, to a solution of free progesterone (100 μM) or CMO progesterone containing 100 μM BSA (see Fig. 6 for results).

Fluorescence and light microscopy were performed using a Nikon microphot-FX. Suspensions of sperm were mixed with 10 μM FITC-BSA for 1 h in the presence (0.05% w/v) of digitonin or in its absence. Images were recorded on VHS videotape using a MTI CCD72 camera and a videoscope image intensifier. Images were printed on a Sony video printer UP-5000/W.

RESULTS

Fig. 1 shows the temporal effects of progesterone, prog CMO, and prog CMO BSA (10 μM progesterone covalently bound) to increase [Ca++]i. This concentration of prog CMO BSA was equivalent to the effect observed with 10 μM progesterone and was the maximum effect seen with prog CMO BSA. Thus, prog CMO BSA acted as a full agonist. The time course of prog CMO BSA to elevate [Ca2+]i was similar to that seen with progesterone; all agents elevated [Ca2+]i, without apparent delay. The BSA control did not elevate [Ca2+]i, which is not surprising since the media already contained 3.0 mg/ml BSA (data not shown). Fig. 2 shows the concentration response curve for prog CMO BSA to elevate [Ca2+]i, compared with the effect of progesterone and prog CMO. Progesterone was more potent than either prog CMO or prog CMO BSA. The EC50 for progesterone was approximately 50 nM, whereas the EC50 for prog CMO BSA was approximately 1 μM. However, prog CMO and prog CMO BSA were essentially equipotent, indicating that the BSA added was not in itself responsible for the reduced potency, even though prog CMO BSA cannot cross the plasma membrane. Consequently, the actions of prog CMO and prog CMO BSA can be accounted for by their extracellular actions.

To confirm that BSA was confined to the extracellular space, FITC-BSA was added to sperm suspensions in the presence (Fig. 3, panels C and D) and absence (panels A and B) of digitonin (0.05% w/v). The data in Fig. 3 show a representative experiment in which sperm in the presence of FITC-BSA were examined under light microscopy (panels A and C) and fluorescence microscopy (panels B and D). Panel A shows an intact sperm under light microscopy; however, the same sperm under fluorescence microscopy (panel B) demonstrates that FITC-BSA is excluded. Conversely, when sperm were treated with digitonin to render them permeable, FITC-BSA was localized intracellularly (panel D). This result confirms the rationale for using the progesterone BSA conjugate to localize cell surface progesterone receptors.

It was previously shown that progesterone was able to promote an increase in [Ca2+]i, by stimulating Ca2+ influx rather than a release of intracellular Ca2+ (Blackmore et al., 1990). The prog CMO BSA-stimulated increase in [Ca2+]i was also due to an influx of extracellular Ca2+, since the response was completely inhibited when extracellular Ca2+ was removed by chelation with the Ca2+ chelator EGTA (Fig. 4). The readidation of Ca2+ to the EGTA-treated cells that were previously exposed to prog CMO BSA resulted in an immediate increase in [Ca2+]i, similar to that observed when Ca2+ was added to the solution.
was initially present. Also shown in Fig. 4 is the effect of the nonselective Ca\(^{2+}\) channel blocker, La\(^{3+}\), which also inhibited the prog CMO BSA-induced increase in [Ca\(^{2+}\)]. These data show that immobilized prog CMO BSA promotes an increase in [Ca\(^{2+}\)], by stimulating Ca\(^{2+}\) influx.

Another sensitive measure of Ca\(^{2+}\) influx is to determine the rate of intracellular fura-2 quenching by Mn\(^{2+}\) (Hallam and Rink, 1985). The data in Fig. 5 show that prog CMO BSA and progesterone cause an immediate decline in fura-2 fluorescence induced by Mn\(^{2+}\). Although not shown, the dose response for the Mn\(^{2+}\)-induced quenching of fura-2 elicited by prog CMO BSA correlates very closely with the rise in [Ca\(^{2+}\)], measured with fura-2 (Fig. 2).

To eliminate the possibility that there was no free progesterone or prog CMO in the prog CMO BSA preparation that was eliciting the increase in [Ca\(^{2+}\)], the prog CMO BSA preparation was treated with charcoal to remove noncovalently bound progesterone or prog CMO. The data in Fig. 6 show that the charcoal treatment had no effect on the ability of 1 \(\mu\)M prog CMO BSA to increase [Ca\(^{2+}\)]. Charcoal was, however, capable of removing noncovalently bound progesterone or prog CMO in the prog CMO BSA preparation.

The data presented above clearly show that the progesterone receptor responsible for mediating Ca\(^{2+}\) influx resides on the extracellular surface of the sperm and not on the intracellular surface. It was of interest to compare this cell surface receptor with the intracellular genomic receptor and the Xenopus oocyte surface progesterone receptor regarding pharmacological characteristics. The synthetic progestin agonists R5020 and norethindrone elicited a small increase in intracellular free Ca\(^{2+}\) but only at high concentrations and to only approximately 10% of the maximum effect elicited by progesterone and prog CMO BSA (Fig. 7). The antiandrogen cyproterone acetate, which is also a potent progestin (Neri, 1976), was also without effect on [Ca\(^{2+}\)] (Fig. 7). In addition to the data shown in Fig. 7, the data in Table 1 show the effect of several other progestins on [Ca\(^{2+}\)]. It can be seen that only 17\(\alpha\)-hydroxyprogesterone and 11\(\alpha\)-hydroxyprogesterone had effects on [Ca\(^{2+}\)], similar to that observed with progesterone. The other hand, the potent synthetic genomic progestins megestrol, medroxyprogesterone acetate, norgestrel, norethindrone, and norethynodrel (Gilman et al., 1990) were very
progesterone concentrations. In another set of experiments, and many synthetic progestins have a higher affinity for the actions that requires a 10-fold lower concentration of progesterone. This is in contrast to the antagonism of genomic progesterone receptor that is present in the plasma membrane of the spermatozoa and that the progesterone-binding site resides in that portion of the receptor that is exposed to the extracellular space.

The presence of a carboxymethylxime group on carbon 3 of progesterone reduced its sensitivity for inducing the Ca\(^{2+}\) influx in human sperm. The most likely conclusion to be drawn from the present results is that there is a receptor that is present in the plasma membrane of the spermatozoa and that the progesterone-binding site resides in that portion of the receptor that is exposed to the extracellular space.

The data presented in this study clearly show that progesterone immobilized by covalent linkage to BSA is capable of eliciting Ca\(^{2+}\) influx in human sperm. The most likely conclusion to be drawn from the present results is that there is a receptor that is present in the plasma membrane of the spermatozoa and that the progesterone-binding site resides in that portion of the receptor that is exposed to the extracellular space.

The data in Fig. 9 show that equimolar doses of ZK98.299 or RU38486 to inhibit 0.1 \(\mu M\) progesterone-mediated increases in Ca\(^{2+}\). See legend to Fig. 8 for details. The data shown are the mean from three separate experiments.

**DISCUSSION**

The data presented in this study clearly show that progesterone immobilized by covalent linkage to BSA is capable of eliciting Ca\(^{2+}\) influx in human sperm. The most likely conclusion to be drawn from the present results is that there is a receptor that is present in the plasma membrane of the spermatozoa and that the progesterone-binding site resides in that portion of the receptor that is exposed to the extracellular space.

The effect of the two potent genomic antiprogestins ZK98.299 and RU38486 (Baulieu, 1989) was also examined to see whether they would block progesterone-mediated increases [Ca\(^{2+}\)]. The data in Fig. 8 show that either antagonists at 10 \(\mu M\) had small inhibitory effects over a wide range of progesterone concentrations. In another set of experiments, various concentrations of both antiprogestins RU38486 and ZK98.299 were examined to see if they would inhibit a submaximal (~80% of maximum) concentration of progesterone (0.1 \(\mu M\)). The data in Fig. 9 show that equimolar doses of ZK98.299 and RU38486 (i.e. 0.1 \(\mu M\)) had a small inhibitory effect. However, when a large 1000-fold excess of each antagonist was added, nearly complete inhibition was observed. This is in contrast to the antagonism of genomic progesterone actions that requires a 10-fold lower concentration of RU38486 to completely block progesterone effects. RU38486 and many synthetic progestins have a higher affinity for the genomic progesterone receptor than progesterone with a \(K_d\) < 1 nM (Baulieu 1989). These data indicate that the cell surface progesterone receptor responsible for eliciting an increase in [Ca\(^{2+}\)], is distinct from the intracellular genomic progesterone receptor from the standpoint of agonist and antagonist specificity.

**TABLE I**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Progestin</th>
<th>Increase in [Ca(^{2+})], expressed as % of maximum progesterone effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Progesterone</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17\alpha-Hydroxyprogesterone</td>
<td>133 ± 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11\alpha-Hydroxyprogesterone</td>
<td>102 ± 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-Hydroxyprogesterone or (11-deoxycorticosterone)</td>
<td>32 ± 6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megestrol</td>
<td>5 ± 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medroxyprogesterone acetate</td>
<td>14 ± 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norgestrel</td>
<td>1 ± 1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norethindrone</td>
<td>8 ± 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norethynodrel</td>
<td>12 ± 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**FIG. 8.** Concentration response curves of ZK98.299 or RU38486 to inhibit 0.1 \(\mu M\) progesterone-mediated increases in [Ca\(^{2+}\)]. See legend to Fig. 8 for details. The data shown are the mean from three separate experiments.

**FIG. 9.** Concentration response curves of progesterone to increase [Ca\(^{2+}\)], in the presence and absence of 10 \(\mu M\) ZK98.299 or 10 \(\mu M\) RU38486. To fura-2-loaded sperm, 10 \(\mu M\) ZK98.299 or 10 \(\mu M\) RU38486 was added 15 s before the addition of progesterone. The peak responses were measured, which usually occurred 20–30 s after the progesterone additions. The data shown are the mean from three separate experiments.
protein (Birnbaumer et al., 1990) that then activates the Ca\(^{2+}\) channel. The latter possibility does not appear to be operative since the nonselective G protein activator AlF\(_4\) (e.g. Blackmore et al., 1985) failed to promote Ca\(^{2+}\) influx (Blackmore et al., 1990). 3) The progesterone receptor may stimulate a protease that activates the Ca\(^{2+}\) influx process. In support of this possibility is the observation that the human sperm acrosome reaction is inhibited by proteinase inhibitors (DeJonge et al., 1989). 4) The progesterone receptor activates another second messenger system, such as phospholipase D, which if activated would elevate phosphatic acid levels (e.g. Bocckino et al., 1987). This activity has been demonstrated in sea urchin sperm (Domino et al., 1989). Perhaps phosphatidate acts as a second messenger to elevate [Ca\(^{2+}\)], (see Bocckino et al. (1987) for references). 5) The progesterone receptor is a Ca\(^{2+}\) channel or a binding site on a Ca\(^{2+}\) channel analogous to the steroid-binding site on the neuronal Cl\(^-\) ion channel (Wu et al., 1990). 6) The progesterone receptor couples directly to a Ca\(^{2+}\) channel by some unknown mechanism.

Another feature of the data presented is the lack of similarity of this receptor to the genomic progesterone receptor in regard to steroid selectivity. The synthetic genomic agonists R5020, norgesteral, norethynodrel, medroxyprogesterone acetate, megestral, and norethindrone were very weak partial agonists, and the potent genomic antiprogestins RU3846 and ZK98.299 were very weak antagonists of the progesterone effects in sperm (Figs. 8 and 9) compared with their potency in affecting the genomic receptor.

Acknowledgment—The skilled technical assistance of Patty Loose is gratefully acknowledged.

Addendum—After the submission of this manuscript, another study was submitted showing that prog CMO BSA stimulated the sperm acrosome reaction (Meizel and Turner, 1991).

REFERENCES

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