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Neuronal Activity and the Expression of Clathrin Assembly Protein AP180

Fangbai Wu, Mark P. Mattson, and Pamela J. Yao*

Laboratory of Neurosciences, NIA/NIH, Baltimore, Maryland 21224

Abstract

The clathrin assembly protein AP180 is known to promote the assembly of clathrin-coated vesicles in the neuron. However, it is unknown whether the expression of AP180 is influenced by neuronal activity. In this study, we report that chronic depolarization results in a reduction of AP180 from hippocampal neurons, while acute depolarization causes a dispersed synaptic distribution of AP180. Activity-induced effects are observed only for AP180, but not for the structurally-related clathrin assembly proteins CALM, epsin1, or HIP1. These findings suggest that AP180 levels and synaptic distribution are highly sensitive to neuronal activity.

Keywords

AP180; hippocampal neuron; CALM; epsin1; HIP1

Introduction

Clathrin-coated vesicles are highly versatile trafficking organelles fulfilling many functions such as internalizing extracellular molecules, transducing intracellular signaling, and recycling synaptic vesicle components at the synapse. As a consequence, the clathrin-coated vesicle is equipped with extensive and well-coordinated regulatory proteins. Some of these regulatory proteins direct the construction of clathrin-coated vesicles, whereas others control the functions of the vesicles.

AP180 is one such regulatory protein [1–3]. Biochemical studies have shown that AP180 promotes the assembly of clathrin-coated vesicles as well as restraining their small uniform sizes [4,5]. Functional studies carried out in invertebrates have demonstrated that disruption of AP180 causes malformed synaptic vesicles and dysfunctional synaptic release [6–8]. However, neither the regulation nor the functional role of AP180 in vertebrate or mammalian neurons is well understood.

In previous studies, we found that AP180 is highly enriched in the presynaptic terminals of rat hippocampal neurons [9,10]. To understand the functional significance of AP180 in hippocampal neurons, it is necessary to know not only how AP180 acts in synaptic release, but also whether neuronal activity regulates AP180. In this study, we examined AP180 protein expression in chronically or acutely depolarized neurons. We also compared the

*Corresponding author: Pamela J. Yao, Ph.D., Laboratory of Neurosciences, NIA/NIH Biomedical Research Center, 251 Bayview Boulevard, Baltimore, Maryland 21224, Phone: 410-558-8586, Fax: 410-558-8323, yaopa@grc.nia.nih.gov.

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expression of AP180 in these neurons to the expression of several other clathrin regulatory proteins that have the structure organization similar to AP180, including CALM (clathrin assembly lymphoid myeloid protein)[11,12], epsin1 [13,14], and HIP1 (huntingtin-interacting protein 1)[15,16]. We have found that neuronal activity specifically affects AP180 expression and synaptic localization.

Materials and Methods

Animals and cell culture

All animal procedures were approved by the National Institute on Aging Animal Care and Use Committee and compiled with the NIH Guide for Care and Use of Laboratory Animals. Timed pregnant female Sprague-Dawley rats were used as the source of hippocampal cells (embryonic day 17 – 18). Cultures of hippocampal neurons were prepared as described previously [3,17]. Dissociated neurons were grown in Neurobasal medium containing B27 (Invitrogen).

Reagents

The following antibodies were used: mouse monoclonal anti-AP180 (clone AP180-I; Sigma) [4,9,10,18]; goat polyclonal anti-CALM (sc6433; Santa Cruz Biotechnology)[19]; rabbit polyclonal anti-epsin1 (a gift from Dr. Linton M. Traub)[20,21]; rabbit polyclonal anti-HIP1 (also a gift from Dr. Linton M. Traub)[16,21]; mouse monoclonal anti-synaptophysin (Sigma); and rabbit polyclonal anti-synapsin I (Chemicon International). Tetrodotoxin and bicuculline were from Sigma.

Immunoblots

Cell lysates were prepared as described [22]. Immunoblotting was performed using standard procedures. The following dilutions of the antibodies were used: AP180, 1:5000; CALM, 1:500; epsin1, 1:500; HIP1, 1:500; synaptophysin, 1:5000.

Immunolabeling and image analysis

Immunofluorescence labeling was carried out as previously described [3]. The AP180 antibody was used at 1:5000; the synapsin 1 antibody was used at 1:2500. The labeled neurons were examined using a 40X objective on a Zeiss LSM510 laser scanning confocal microscope. The confocal acquisition settings were kept the same for those samples when quantification was performed. The brightness, contrast and levels of the images were minimally adjusted (in Adobe Photoshop 8.0) for those images presented. No additional digital image processing was performed. Puncta counts were performed using ImageJ. The average intensity of synaptic and non-synaptic AP180 or synapsin 1 labeling was determined using imageJ and the synaptic/non-synaptic ratio was obtained.

Results and Discussion

Our goal was to examine whether neuronal activity has effects on the expression of AP180. We used cultured hippocampal neurons to assess the expression level and pattern of AP180. Neuronal activity was evoked by KCl, or silenced by sodium channel blocker tetrodotoxin TTX. The AP180 antibody used throughout this study has been characterized and described in several previous studies [4,10,18].

AP180 begins to be expressed by embryonic neurons as soon as they acquire a neuronal fate and its level of expression rapidly increases during development [18]. In cultured hippocampal neurons, AP180 is readily detectable as early as 1 div (days *in vitro*) and it remains at a high level in 7 div- and 14 div-neurons [22]. We began the study by measuring

AP180 in 7 div hippocampal neurons that had been incubated for 24 hours with moderately high potassium (10 mM KCl), TTX (2 μ M), or the GABA_A receptor blocker bicuculline (10 μ M). We found that the levels of AP180 did not vary between the untreated control neurons, the neurons treated with 10 mM KCl, or the neurons silenced by TTX (Figure 1). Moreover, the level of AP180 did not change in the bicuculline-treated neurons (Figure 1A). We also measured the level of CALM, a clathrin-assembly protein that has a domain structure similar to AP180 and that is ubiquitously expressed by all cells including the neurons [10,11]. None of the above treatments affected the expression level of CALM in these neurons (Figure 1A).

Immunofluorescence labeling of the neurons revealed that AP180 was expressed and distributed as discrete puncta, consistent with the synaptic locations of the protein [10]. The punctate expression pattern of AP180 appeared to be identical in the control neurons and the neurons that had been exposed to KCl or TTX (Figure 1B).

In our previous study [3] and additional pilot experiments, we found that while cultured hippocampal neurons grow axons and dendrites as early as ~2 div, they do not develop fully functional synapses until ~10 div. Therefore, we used 14 div neurons containing functionally mature synapses to further characterize the effects of neuronal activity on AP180 expression. Unlike the immature neurons described above (Figure 1), KCl treatment in the mature neurons resulted in a moderate reduction in AP180 expression (Figure 2A). Co-treatment with KCl and TTX partially prevented this reduction, whereas TTX alone did not cause any changes (Figure 2A). Unlike AP180, the level of CALM was unaffected by any of the treatments.

We next asked whether a higher concentration of KCl would further reduce AP180 levels in these neurons. We elevated KCl from 10 mM to 35 mM, a concentration known to strongly depolarize neurons. We found that the neurons exposed to 35 mM KCl had drastically reduced AP180 levels (Figure 2B). While the magnitude of the reduction varied among experiments, the 35 mM KCl-treated neurons always had significantly lower AP180 levels than the control neurons did, as evidenced by the immunoblots (Figure 2B). Co-incubating KCl with TTX nearly completely prevented the loss of AP180. In contrast to AP180, the CALM level was not reduced in the 35 mM KCl-treated neurons (Figure 2B). Furthermore, we measured the levels of two additional clathrin-assembly proteins, epsin1 and HIP1, and found them unaffected by high KCl (Figure 2B). Similarly, high KCl also failed to change the expression of the synaptic vesicle protein synaptophysin. That the levels of these other proteins were unaffected in high KCl-treated neurons suggests that the KCl-induced reduction is specific to AP180.

Analysis of the neurons by immunofluorescence staining confirmed that treatment with high KCl reduces AP180 levels. Unlike the control neurons, where AP180 was seen as bright puncta dotted along the axons, the AP180-puncta in the KCl-treated neurons were scarce and barely visible (Figure 2C). Quantitative analysis revealed that the number of AP180-puncta was significantly lower in the KCl-treated neurons ($49 \pm 11\%$ vs $97 \pm 5\%$ in control neurons, $n = 20$ neurons). The TTX-treated neurons did not show any changes in the expression pattern of AP180.

We next investigated the acute effect of KCl. We treated the neurons with 35 mM KCl for 10 minutes instead of 24 hours. The total level of AP180 was unchanged (Figure 3A). However, immunofluorescence staining revealed diffuse AP180 distribution in the KCl-treated neurons (Figure 3B). Unlike the cleanly separated AP180 puncta along the axons in the control neurons, AP180 immunostaining in the acutely KCl-treated neurons was often seen smeared between the puncta (Figure 3B). Double immunostaining with antibodies

against AP180 and the synaptic marker synapsin I demonstrated co-localized AP180 puncta with synapsin I-positive synaptic puncta in the control neurons as well as the TTX-treated neurons (Figure 3C). However, in the KCl-treated neurons, AP180 immunostaining was also prominent in the segments of the axons between the synapses (Figure 3C,D).

One striking parallel shared by AP180, CALM, epsin1, and HIP1 is that they have the ANTH/ENTH (AP180 N-terminal homology/epsin N-terminal homology) domain at their N-terminus [23,24]. We previously found that, while these four proteins are all expressed in neurons, they have distinct distribution patterns in relation to the synapse: AP180 is predominantly enriched in the presynaptic terminals, HIP1 is preferentially concentrated in the postsynaptic terminals, and CALM and epsin1 are evenly present in both the pre- and postsynaptic terminals [10,21]. Our finding in this study provides evidence that neuronal activity does not seem to have a uniform effect on all ANTH/ENTH-proteins, but exerts an effect on the expression of AP180 only. The presence of these structurally similar and seemingly redundant clathrin assembly proteins likely makes clathrin-mediated vesicle-trafficking systems elaborate and precisely tuned. Our data imply not only that each of these clathrin assembly proteins has a distinctive set of roles but, when it comes to their own regulation, are regulated by different cellular mechanisms.

AP180 immunolabeling co-localized well with synaptic vesicle protein synapsin 1 in the cultured hippocampal neurons (Figure 3C). This is in line with the presynaptic localization of AP180 revealed by electron microscopy [10,22]. The acute KCl-induced AP180 staining that spreads between synaptic puncta could reflect a link between AP180 and those mobile vesicles that travel between synaptic terminals [25]. It is unclear why the punctate distribution of synapsin 1 is not correlated with changes in the distribution of AP180. Given that the primary role of AP180 is to regulate or promote the assembly of clathrin-coated vesicles [4,6,7], the diffused AP180 may be performing the trafficking or refilling functions of various vesicle pools [25].

Research Highlights

- Chronic depolarization causes a reduction of clathrin assembly protein AP180 from mature hippocampal neurons
- Acute depolarization causes a dispersed synaptic distribution of AP180
- Neuronal activity does not influence the expression of other clathrin assembly proteins

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Figure 1.

Exposure to depolarizing or activity-suppressing agents does not affect levels or localization of AP180 in immature hippocampal neurons. **A**, Hippocampal neurons (7 div) were treated with KCl (10 mM), TTX (2 μM), or bicuculline (10 μM) for 24 hours. Immunoblot analysis shows the expression levels of AP180 and CALM in these neurons. The nitrocellulose membrane stained with Coomassie Blue shows even protein loading among the samples. **B**, Immunofluorescence labeling shows the punctate expression pattern of AP180.

Figure 2.

Chronic depolarization reduces AP180 levels in mature hippocampal neurons. **A**, Hippocampal neurons (14 div) were treated with KCl (10 mM), TTX (2 μ M), or bicuculline (10 μ M) for 24 hours. Immunoblot analysis shows a moderate reduction of AP180 in KCl-treated neurons but unchanged CALM. **B**, Hippocampal neurons (also 14 div) were treated with a higher concentration of KCl (35 mM) for 24 hours. Examples of AP180 blots from two (out of four) different experiments show markedly reduced AP180 levels in the KCl-treated neurons. In contrast, the levels of CALM, epsin1, HIP1 and synaptophysin (Syp) are unaffected by KCl. The nitrocellulose membrane stained with Coomassie Blue shows even protein loading among the samples. **C**, Immunofluorescence labeling shows reduced AP180

expression in the KCl-treated neurons. D, Quantification of AP180 immunolabeling shown in C. n = 20 neurons.

Figure 3.

Acute depolarization does not reduce AP180 levels but induces its delocalization from presynaptic terminals. **A**, Immunoblot analysis shows that a short term high KCl does not affect AP180 protein levels. **B**, Immunofluorescence labeling shows that distinct punctate AP180 labeling (white arrowheads) in the control neurons and TTX-silenced neurons. In the KCl-treated neurons, however, AP180 is seen (yellow arrowhead) delocalized to regions between the AP180 puncta. **C**, Double immunofluorescence labeling shows that, in the control neurons as well as in the TTX-treated neurons, the punctate AP180 (green) co-localizes with synapsin 1-labeled synaptic puncta (red)(white arrowheads). In the KCl-treated neurons, AP180 labeling spreads beyond the synaptic puncta (yellow arrowheads).

D, Synaptic enrichment is quantified by dividing average intensity of AP180 or synapsin 1 staining in synaptic puncta to that in processes.