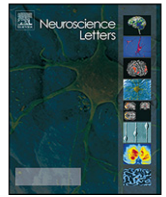
Neuroscience Letters 452 (2009) 124–129

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Neuroscience Letters

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/neulet



H-reflex down-conditioning greatly increases the number of identifiable GABAergic interneurons in rat ventral horn

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 23 October 2008
Received in revised form 15 January 2009
Accepted 21 January 2009

Keywords:
Spinal cord
H-reflex conditioning
Activity-dependent plasticity
GABAergic interneurons
Motor control
Learning and memory

ABSTRACT

H-reflex down-conditioning increases GABAergic terminals on spinal cord motoneurons. To explore the origins of these terminals, we studied the numbers and distributions of spinal cord GABAergic interneurons. The number of identifiable GABAergic interneurons in the ventral horn was 78% greater in rats in which down-conditioning was successful than in naive rats or rats in which down-conditioning failed. No increase occurred in other spinal lamina or on the contralateral side. This finding supports the hypothesis that the corticospinal tract influence that induces the motoneuron plasticity underlying down-conditioning reaches the motoneuron through GABAergic interneurons in the ventral horn.
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Operant conditioning of the H-reflex, the electrical analog of the spinal stretch reflex (SSR), is a simple model for exploring the acquisition and maintenance of motor skills, which can be defined as adaptive behavior acquired through practice [51]. Because the reflex is influenced by descending input from the brain, its pathway can be operantly conditioned. Motivated by an operant conditioning paradigm in which reward depends on reflex size, monkeys [49,53], humans [20,42], rats [9], and mice [8] can gradually increase or decrease the H-reflex or the SSR. These changes, i.e., a smaller or larger H-reflex, constitute simple motor skills. The acquisition of these skills is associated with plasticity in the spinal cord and the brain [6,7,12,14,16,17,21,36,47,54,50] ([51] for review). This acquisition requires the corticospinal tract (CST), but not the other major descending tracts [13,15,10,11].

Monkey and rat data indicate that down-conditioning of the H-reflex is due largely to a positive shift in the firing threshold of the spinal motoneurons that produce the reflex [6]. Since the CST does not contact these motoneurons directly [2,24,32,56], the CST influence responsible for the threshold change is presumably conveyed via spinal interneurons. To identify these interneurons, we first studied the effects of conditioning on synaptic terminals on the motoneurons. We found that successful down-conditioning is associated with a marked increase in the number of identifiable GABAergic terminals on the motoneurons [48]. This increase does not occur in rats in which down-conditioning is not successful. We hypothesize that these GABAergic terminals act through metabotrophic GABA-B receptor to alter sodium channels in the motoneuron membrane, and thereby change firing threshold [7,24].

GABAergic terminals on motoneurons derive from the ventromedullary reticular formation via the ipsilateral dorsolateral funiculus [25]. In addition, interneurons in spinal laminae VI–IX send motoneurons inhibitory projections that are largely GABAergic and/or glycinergic [1,3,5,19,22,26,27,30,31,38]. However, transection of the entire ipsilateral lateral column, including the dorsolateral funiculus, does not impair conditioning [13,11]. Thus, if these terminals are responsible for conditioning, they probably derive from interneurons in spinal laminae VI–IX. Interneurons in these laminae are contacted by CST axons [28,33,45].

To evaluate the hypothesis that GABAergic interneurons in laminae VI–IX are the origin of the GABAergic terminals changed by down-conditioning, we analyzed GABAergic interneurons in lumbar spinal cords of successful and unsuccessful down-conditioned rats and naive rats. The number of identifiable GABAergic interneurons in laminae VII and IX was markedly increased in successful rats only. These results support the hypothesis that the GABAergic interneurons are the CST-motoneuron link responsible for the positive shift in motoneuron firing threshold that underlies the H-reflex decrease.

Subjects were 16 young adult (about 5 months old) male Sprague–Dawley rats weighing 497 (±21SD) g at the time of euthanasia and perfusion. Ten had undergone electrode implan-

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doi:10.1016/j.neulet.2009.01.054

tation and H-reflex down-conditioning. The other six constituted a naive control group. All were studied anatomically as described here. All procedures satisfied the "*Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals*" of the Institute of Laboratory Animal Resources, Commission on Life Sciences, National Research Council (National Academy Press, Washington, D.C., 1996) and had been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of the Wadsworth Center. The protocols for H-reflex conditioning, motoneuron labeling, and immunohistochemical processing are fully described elsewhere [12,48,52] and summarized here. Other procedures are described in detail.

Under general anesthesia [pentobarbital sodium (65 mg/kg), i.p.], each of 10 rats was implanted with stimulating and recording electrodes. To elicit the H-reflex, a nerve-stimulating cuff was placed on the right posterior tibial nerve just proximal to the triceps surae branches. To record soleus EMG activity, fine-wire electrodes were inserted in the right soleus muscle. The Teflon-coated wires from the nerve cuff and the EMG recording electrodes passed subcutaneously to a connector mounted on the skull.

Data collection started at least 20 days after implantation. During data collection, each rat lived in a standard rat cage with a flexible cable attached to the head plug. The cable, which allowed the rat to move freely about the cage, carried the wires from the electrodes to an electronic swivel above the cage, from which they passed to an EMG amplifier and a nerve-cuff stimulation unit. The rat had free access to water and food, except that, during H-reflex down-conditioning, it received food mainly by performing the task described below. Animal well-being was carefully checked several times each day, and body weight was measured weekly. Laboratory lighting was reduced from 21:00 to 06:00 h each day.

A computer system continuously (24 h/day, 7 day/wk) monitored soleus EMG and controlled the nerve-cuff stimulus. Whenever the absolute value (i.e., equivalent to the full-wave rectified value) of background (i.e., ongoing) EMG stayed within a defined range for a randomly varying 2.3–2.7 s period, a stimulus pulse (typically 0.5 ms long) was delivered by the nerve cuff. Pulse amplitude was initially set to produce a small M response (i.e., it was set just above M response threshold), and then was automatically adjusted after each trial to maintain EMG amplitude for the M response interval (typically 2.0–4.5 ms after stimulation) unchanged. Thus, the background EMG (reflecting soleus motoneuron tone at the time of H-reflex elicitation) and the M-response (reflecting the effective strength of the nerve-cuff stimulus) remained stable throughout data collection.

Under the control mode, the computer simply measured the absolute value of soleus EMG for 50 ms following the stimulus. Under the down-conditioning mode, it gave a reward (i.e., a food pellet) 200 ms after stimulation if EMG amplitude in the H-reflex interval (i.e., typically 6.0–10.0 ms after stimulation) was below a criterion value. In the course of its daily activity, the animal usually satisfied the background EMG requirement, and thus received nerve-cuff stimulation 2700–7800 times per day. H-reflex size was calculated as average EMG amplitude in the H-reflex interval minus average background EMG amplitude, and was expressed in units of average background EMG amplitude. Each rat was first exposed to the control mode for 20 days to determine the control H-reflex size and was then exposed to the down-conditioning mode for 50 days. Finally the rat was euthanized and perfused as described below.

To determine the final effect of the down-conditioning mode on H-reflex size, average H-reflex size for the final 10 days of the 50-day exposure was calculated as per cent of the control H-reflex size (i.e., the average of the final 10 control-mode days). Down-conditioning was considered to be successful if final H-reflex size was ≤80% of control H-reflex size [9,55].

H-reflex conditioning was successful in 6 of the 10 down-conditioned rats. (This success rate was not significantly different from the rate of 75% found in all 72 rats down-conditioned to date [9–11,13–15].) In the six successful down-conditioned rats (i.e., DS rats), final H-reflex size averaged 51 (±3SE)% of its control value. In each of the four unsuccessful rats (i.e., DF (i.e., failed) rats), final H-reflex size was within 20% of its control value, and the average value for the four rats was 105 (±7SE)% of control. For all 10 rats, background EMG and M-response remained stable throughout data collection.

Each rat was euthanized by an overdose of sodium pentobarbital and perfused intracardially with 4% paraformaldehyde in 0.1 M phosphate buffer (pH 7.3). The lumbosacral spinal cord was removed and postfixed for 2 h, washed with 0.05 M phosphate buffer containing 137 mM NaCl (PBS, pH 7.4), and infiltrated with 30% sucrose for 24 h. The spinal cord containing the soleus motoneuron pool (i.e., L4-6) was blocked, embedded in OCT compound (Tissue-Tek), and frozen on dry ice. Transverse 25-μm frozen sections were cut with a cryostat, mounted onto precoated glass slides (Superfrost; Fisher). The slides were then stored in a low-temperature freezer (−80 °C) before further immunohistochemistry processing.

The standard avidin–biotin complex (ABC)-peroxidase system (ABC Elite; Vector Laboratories, Burlingame, CA) was used to assess GAD67-immunoreactivity as described previously [48]. GAD67-immunoreactivity, which is a standard method for labeling GABAergic terminals has also been found useful for labeling GABAergic neurons in adult as well as young animals [3,4,18,30,37,39,43,44,46]. All processing was conducted at room temperature (20 °C). Every other 25-μm section through the spinal cord containing the soleus motoneurons was washed three times (10 min each) with 0.05 M phosphate-buffered saline containing 0.1% Triton X-100 (PBST, pH 7.4), blocked with 5%-normal goat serum, and incubated with rabbit anti-GAD67 polyclonal antibody (K2 antibody (Chemicon, Temecula, CA) at 1:2000 dilution) in PBST containing 3% bovine serum albumin for 18–20 h [29]. The secondary goat anti-rabbit biotinylated antibody (1:200 in PBS) was applied for 1.5 h. Endogenous peroxidase activity was quenched by 0.3% H_2O_2 for 30 min, and the sections were reacted with the avidin–biotin complex for 1.5 h (1:100 in PBS). They were washed in 0.05 M Tris–HCl buffer (TBS, pH adjusted to 7.6 before color development). The sections were reacted with 0.04% DAB (Sigma, St. Louis) solution and 0.006% H_2O_2 for 8 min to optimize the signal-to-noise ratio. Finally, they were washed for 40 min, dehydrated, and mounted with Permount. Each processing session included matching sections from all three rat groups.

Every other GAD67-labeled section was examined at low magnification (i.e., 50×, with a 4× objective) and then examined and photographed at high magnification (500×, with a 40× objective) with an Olympus BH2-RFCA brightfield microscope equipped with an Olympus DP70 digital camera at fixed illumination. These high-magnification images were coded for blinded analysis using the image J program (NIH, version 1.29x) by two people (YW and SP) who worked independently and then resolved any differences by discussion. Analysis was confined to those GAD67-positive neurons in the ventral horns of GAD67-labeled sections that had: a clearly defined somatic border; a nucleus and/or at least one dendritic process; an average soma diameter (average of the long and short somatic axes) under 25 μm; and an average somatic area under 400 μm^2. Neurons that satisfied all these criteria were identified as GABAergic interneurons, and each was assigned a laminar location according to Molander et al. [35]. For each GABAergic interneuron, we determined soma diameter (i.e., Feret's diameter, equivalent to the long axis of the soma), soma area, and the average luminance of the entire soma (which reflected the intensity of GAD67-immunoreactivity (GAD-IR) [48]).

We compared the GAD67-labeled interneuron data from three experimental groups: rats in which H-reflex down-conditioning

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