OptoGluNAM4.1, a photoswitchable allosteric antagonist for real time control of $mGlu_4$ receptor activity

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Summary

OptoGluNAM4.1, a negative allosteric modulator (NAM) of metabotropic glutamate receptor 4 ($mGlu_4$) contains a reactive group that covalently binds to the receptor and a blue light-activated, fast relaxing azobenzene group that allows the reversible receptor activity photocontrol *in vitro* and *in vivo*. OptoGluNAM4.1 induces light-dependent behavior in zebrafish and reverses the $mGlu_4$ agonist LSP4-2022 activity in a mice model of chronic pain, defining a photopharmacological tool to better elucidate the physiological roles of mGlu4 receptor in the nervous system.

Introduction

Photopharmacology is based on the use of light sensitive ligands for the optical control of specific proteins in cells, tissues or live animals. This innovative and unconventional approach uses light for the precise control of drug activity, which in combination with spatio-temporal patterns of illumination can enable localized therapeutic effects and dosage adjustment to maximize efficacy and minimize side-effects (Gorostiza and Isacoff, 2008). The photochromic ligands can rapidly and reversibly switch on or off the activity of a protein with light in delimited and specific localizations and time intervals, and have the potential for precise drug therapeutics (Reiner et al., 2015). G-protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) represent a large family of transmembrane receptors with fertile therapeutic targets for drug development (Conn et al., 2009). Metabotropic glutamate (mGlu) receptors are class C GPCRs that play important roles in a broad range of central nervous system (CNS) functions with promise for the treatment of various psychiatric and neurological disorders (Nicoletti et al., 2011). In particular, the $mGlu_4$ subtype has recently attracted much attention due to its involvement in several diseases, including chronic pain (Huang et al., 2014).

Owing to the difficulty in developing subtype selective orthosteric ligands, significant effort has been recently directed towards identifying drugs that act at mGlu receptor allosteric sites (Conn et al., 2009; Wenthur et al., 2014). Azobenzene-containing photoswitchable molecules have been used for optical control of mGlu receptors at their orthosteric (Levitz et al., 2013) and allosteric (Pittolo et al., 2014) sites.

Results and Discussion

In the present work, OptoGluNAM4.1 (compound **1**, **Figure 1a**) emerged from a screening of photoisomerizable azobenzene molecules as an antagonist, decreasing both $mGlu_4$ basal and orthosteric agonist mediated activities in a dose-dependent manner (**Figure 1b**, left top panel

and **Figure S1**). A saturation of the inhibitory effect indicated either an allosteric behavior of the drug or to solubility issues. In order to test the allosteric properties of OptoGluNAM4.1 we performed a series of experiments with either the full receptor (**Figure 1b**, right top panel), the receptor containing a mutation that renders $mGlu_4$ insensitive to glutamate (**Figure 1b**, left bottom panel) and a headless truncated version that lacks the extracellular domain where orthosteric agonists bind (**Figure 1b**, right bottom panel). These receptor constructs were activated by the known allosteric agonist VU0155041 (Rovira et al., 2015) and competed with increasing concentrations of OptoGluNAM4.1, which reduced $mGlu_4$ activation. Overall, these results confirmed the interaction of the molecule in an allosteric site located in the transmembrane domain and having a typical profile of negative allosteric modulator (NAM), which is to our knowledge the second $mGlu_4$ NAM described so far (Utley et al., 2011) in contrast with the high number of positive allosteric modulators (PAMs) discovered for this receptor (Rovira et al., 2015). OptoGluNAM4.1 showed no PAM activity over any mGlu subtype at high concentrations and, besides the $mGlu_4$ NAM activity, only a partial NAM effect on $mGlu_7$ was observed (**Figure S1**). A computational study performed with a molecular model of the $mGlu_4$ receptor (**Figure 1c**) suggeststhe OptoGluNAM4.1 interaction in the transmembrane domain, similar to that of PAMs of $mGlu_4$ (Rovira et al., 2015) and NAMs of $mGlu_1$ and $mGlu_5$ (Harpsøe et al., 2015). The mutation of two amino acid positions (L756S and V826M) was aimed at topologically delimiting the boundaries of the putative allosteric binding site in the $mGlu_4$ protein (**Figure S1** and **Movie S1**). When OptoGluNAM4.1 was tested on L756S $mGlu_4$ cells, its inhibitory potency was increased over that of wt protein, while the V826M mutation was less sensitive to the ligand than wt $mGlu_4$, indicating that the molecule occupies the whole allosteric pocket (**Figure 1d**) and further supporting the binding mode proposed. Consistently, these mutations did not alter the potency of the $mGlu_4$ orthosteric agonist L-AP4 (**Figure S1**).

The inclusion of an azobenzene group within the chemical structure of a drug confers potential photochromic activity to the molecule (Broichhagen et al., 2015). Two common properties of reported azobenzene ligands impose limitations for biological applications. First, the light source used to induce the *trans* to *cis* isomerization is usually in the UV-violet range, which is arguably not optimal for *in vivo* applications because of reduced tissue penetration and potential cell damage. The second limitation derives from the thermal stability of *cis*-azobenzene in the dark, which may require a second wavelength illumination to return to the *trans* isomer for efficient switching. In the present work, we could circumvent these possible drawbacks since OptoGluNAM4.1 isomerizes with blue light and shows a quick back-isomerization when dark conditions are recovered (**Figure 2a**). OptoGluNAM4.1 exhibits a wide

visible absorption band and light sources from 420 nm to 460 nm were found to produce efficient *trans* to *cis* photoisomerization (**Figure 2b** and **S2A**). This change was reversed by applying red light (630 nm) or by spontaneous thermal relaxation when the blue illumination was discontinued. Absorption was maintained in several light switching cycles (**Figure S2A**). Interestingly, *cis* to *trans* relaxation in dark was very fast (**Figure 2c** and **S2A**) and it should enable the photocontrol of $mGlu_4$ activity with a single illumination wavelength (Chi et al.).

Single cell calcium imaging experiments demonstrated the ability of OptoGluNAM4.1 to optically control $mGlu_4$. Indeed, the application of OptoGluNAM4.1 in the dark impeded the activation of the receptor by L-AP4 and 430 nm illumination restored L-AP4 induced intracellular calcium responses (**Figure 2d, S2B and Movie S2**). The OptoGluNAM4.1 activity was only abolished upon illumination conditions and it was rapidly reestablished in the dark as as expected from its fast relaxation dynamics. The quantification of the single cell experiments showed significant differences between illuminated and dark situations (**Figure 2e**), whereas no light effect was found for the antagonism of L-AP4 induced-activity by LY341495, a general non-photoswitchable orthosteric antagonist of mGlu receptors (**Figure 2f**).

The OptoGluNAM4.1 molecule contains a 2-chloroethyl substituent at nitrogen, similar to that present in drugs such as chlorambucil or bendamustine, which belong to the nitrogen mustard family of anticancer agents. It is well known that the mechanism of action of these molecules involves an electrophilic alkylation and cross-linking of DNA (Gandhi, 2002), where the *N*-2-chloroethyl substituent plays an essential role, generating a highly reactive aziridinium electrophile that reacts with nucleophiles present in the biomolecules after binding. This chemical reactivity has also been employed in the development of GPCR covalent ligands (Weichert and Gmeiner, 2015). We hypothesized that a similar mechanism could take place in our case and explain some of the pharmacological effects observed with OptoGluNAM4.1. A light-dependent NAM effect was maintained in $mGlu_4$ expressing cells even after extensive washout of the allosteric ligand (**Figure S2B**). This could indicate the conjugation of the compound to the protein receptor, compatible with the precedents of the reactivity of 2-chloroethyl anilines after binding to DNA or proteins. To better study this phenomenon, single cell experiments were conducted in which a meticulous washing protocol was applied (**Figure 2g** and **S2C**). Again, we observed that the antagonistic effect persisted and that this could be switched off after illumination and restored in the dark, indicating the photoreversible receptor activation after removal of the ligand in solution. These results were in contrast with those obtained with the closely related compound **2** (**Figure 2g** and **S2C**) containing a hydroxyl group instead of the chlorine atom at the nitrogen substituent (**Figure S2B**). Of note,

compound **2** is unable to chemically react with the protein residues but it conserves antagonist properties similar to OptoGluNAM4.1 albeit at higher concentration (**Figure S2B**). We independently confirmed this permanent effect in inositol phosphate end point assays. When OptoGluNAM4.1 was incubated for 20 min and after a thorough washing protocol, a dose-response of the $mGlu_4$ agonist L-AP4 corroborated a remaining NAM effect, evidenced by the inhibition of the constitutive activity (**Figure 2h**). This effect was decreased by the application of blue light, thus suggesting that the activity was due to the presence of covalently bound OptoGluNAM4.1 (**Figure 2i**). GPCR covalent allosteric ligands are scarce (Davie et al., 2014) in spite of their singular pharmacological profile.

We next implemented *in vivo* assays to determine OptoGluNAM4.1 activity in animal behavior. We first tested its $mGlu_4$ NAM activity in a mouse model of inflammatory chronic pain (Vilar et al., 2013). One week after the complete Freund's adjuvant (CFA) injection, an increase of mechanical hypersensitivity was observed for all animal groups, which was reduced by activation of spinal $mGlu_4$ receptors following intrathecal injection of the $mGlu_4$ orthosteric agonist LSP4-2022 (Vilar et al., 2013). OptoGluNAM4.1 was able to block the analgesic effect induced by LSP4–2022 (**Figure 3a** and **S3**) in line with its $mGlu_4$ antagonist activity whereas OptoGluNAM4.1 alone did not have any measurable effect. At the concentrations used here, the LSP4-2022 inhibition of mechanical hypersensitivity is lost in $mGlu_4$ KO animals (Vilar et al., 2013) and therefore this compound is believed to selectively exert its effects through the $mGlu_4$ receptor. The reversal of LSP4-2022 physiological effects by OptoGluNAM4.1 suggests that its action is likely exerted through $mGlu_4$, although a partial contribution of $mGlu_7$ antagonism cannot be ruled out (**Figure S1**). Overall, these results confirmed that OptoGluNAM4.1 is active and suitable for *in vivo* experimentation in mice.

To test the light dependent activity *in vivo* we set up behavioral assays in transparent zebrafish larvae, which are amenable to illumination (Portugues et al., 2013). In comparison to mammals, the mGlu family of receptors in zebrafish have similar expression patterns and high amino acid sequence similarity (Haug et al., 2013). The activity of OptoGluNAM4.1 in water was evaluated by monitoring zebrafish locomotion. In the dark, OptoGluNAM4.1 treatment increased the free-swimming distance over untreated control animals (**Figure 3b**). We next compared its effects with those exerted by Alloswitch-1, an azobenzene selective NAM of $mGlu_5$ (Pittolo et al., 2014). In the absence of illumination, Alloswitch-1 was found to exert an inhibitory action of the fish locomotion (**Figure S3 and Movie S5**) over that of untreated controls. The opposite effects found for OptoGluNAM4.1 and Alloswitch-1 on animal behavior (**Figure 3b** and **Figure S3**) are consistent with the opposite synaptic roles of these receptors.

Indeed, the activation of $mGlu_4$ (and also $mGlu_7$) is known to inhibit synaptic glutamate release whereas $mGlu_5$ has a positive modulatory effect on neuronal activity (Nicoletti et al., 2011). We next tested the effect of *cis-trans* isomerization by illumination of the zebrafish larvae. *In vivo* optical control of OptoGluNAM4.1 and Alloswitch-1 on Zebrafish demonstrated reversibility (**Figure 3c, Figure S3c,e and Movies S3-5**). The increase of the free-swimming distance observed in animals treated with OptoGluNAM4.1 over the untreated control group, was reduced to similar levels upon illumination of the larvae with blue light. On the contrary, the reduced free-swimming distance elicited *in vivo* by Alloswitch-1 was not only reversed by 380 nm illumination but increased over untreated controls, in agreement with the activity rebounding previously reported in a heterologous cellular system expressing mGlu5 (Pittolo et al., 2014). It is worth noting the biological activity of these photoswitchable NAM compounds and the light-dependent effects induced in cells and living animals, thus highlighting the usefulness of photopharmacology in the discovery of new pharmacological paradigms.

Significance

OptoGluNAM4.1 is the first $mGlu_4$ NAM compound with *in vivo* activity described to date. It can be useful as a tool to investigate the effects of $mGlu_4$ receptor (and eventually $mGlu_7$) both in cells and in living animals, and amenable to dissect the physiological roles of this receptor in the nervous system. Moreover, the OptoGluNAM4.1 advantageous photoswitch properties with blue light isomerization and fast relaxation in the dark facilitate the safe and efficient control of receptor activity with a single illumination wavelength. OptoGluNAM4.1 permanent activity in endogenous $mGlu_4$ after washing out further increases the versatility of the photoswitchable ligand, expanding the molecular tool set in photopharmacology.

Experimental Procedures

Synthesis of molecules.

A description of the synthesis of compounds OptoGluNAM4.1 (**1**) and compound **2** is given in the Supplemental Information.

In vitro mGlu receptor functional assay.

HEK 293 cells were cultured and transfected by electroporation for expression of all rat mGlu receptors. We estimated IP accumulation using the IP-One HTRF kit (Cisbio Bioassays) both in

dark and violet light illumination (LED plate, FCTecnics) as previously reported (Pittolo et al., 2014). All points were realized in triplicate and read with a RUBYstar HTRF HTS microplate reader (BMG Labtech). Dose–response curves were fitted using Prism software (GraphPad, La Jolla, CA, USA). See Supplemental Methods for detailed procedure.

Molecular modeling

Following the protocol described previously (Rovira et al., 2015), a model of mGlu4 was generated with Modeller 9.12 using the crystal structure of mGlu5. OptoGluNAM4.1 was introduced by docking using AutoDock Vina. Discovery studio visualizer (Accelrys Software Inc., San Diego, CA, USA) and Jalview 2.8 were used for protein structure and sequence analysis, respectively. See Supplemental Methods for detailed procedure.

Photochemical characterization.

Absorption spectra were recorded on a Varian Cary 300 UV-Vis spectrophotometer (Agilent Technologies) using a quartz cuvette. Photoisomerization was accomplished by irradiation with a 430 nm-LED array (FCTecnics) or 630 nm-LED (Photo Activation Universal Light (PAUL), Geniul). Transient absorption measurements were registered in a ns laser flash-photolysis system (LKII, Applied Photophysics) equipped with a Nd:YAG laser (Brilliant, Quantel) and a photomultiplier tube (Hamamatsu). See Supplemental Methods for detailed procedure.

Single-cell calcium imaging and photostimulation.

HEK tsA201 cells were cultured, transfected and seeded as previously reported (Pittolo et al., 2014). Fura-2 AM was loaded into the cells, excited with a Polychrome V light source (Till Photonics) and the resulting images acquired with an inverted digital microscope (iMic, Till Photonics). The fluorescence ratio was calculated by the software (LA Arivis Browser 1.6, Arivis). Variations in intracellular calcium were evaluated with IgorPro 6.0.5 (WaveMetrics). Dose-response curves were fitted with Prism (GraphPad, La Jolla, CA, USA). Videos were edited from raw images using Fiji (ImageJ). See Supplemental Methods for detailed procedure.

Mechanical allodynia in a mouse pain model.

Von Frey assay in 8- to 10-weeks-old C57BL/6 mice was used to evaluate the effect of mGlu4 compounds. We chose a chronic inflammatory pain model induced by unilateral intraplantar injection of complete Freund's adjuvant (CFA; Mycobacterium tuberculosis; Sigma).

Compounds were intrathecally administered. Data were analyzed with Prism software (GraphPad, La Jolla, CA, USA). See Supplemental Methods for detailed procedure.

Zebrafish

Wild-type TL (Tupfel long fin) specimen were used for these experiments. Monitoring of the animal locomotion was made with the Zebrabox using the optogenetic module (Viewpoint Life Sciences). One larvae per well was placed in a 96 well plate (BD Falcon) with E3 medium. Data were analyzed using with Prism software (GraphPad, La Jolla, CA, USA). See Supplemental Methods for detailed procedure.

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Figure Legends

Figure 1| OptoGluNAM4.1 is a negative allosteric modulator of mGlu4.

(**a**) Chemical structure of OptoGluNAM4.1 compound containing the azobenzene moiety. (**b**) Dose-response curves of the orthosteric agonist L-AP4 or the allosteric agonist VU015041 in the presence of different doses of OptoGluNAM4.1 in wild type, a mutated $mGlu_4$ receptor(which is insensitive to glutamate), and an ECD-truncated $mGlu_4$ receptor. (**c**) Localization of the OptoGluNAM4.1 binding site within a model of the transmembrane domain proposed by a protein docking study. Two amino acid positions (L756S and V826M) topologically delimit the allosteric binding pocket. (**d**) Dose-response curves for a wild type and mutated receptors after stimulation with the agonist both in presence and in absence of OptoGluNAM4.1. Each data point corresponds to mean ± SEM of at least 3 experiments performed.

Figure 2 | OptoGluNAM4.1 can be dynamically regulated by blue light.

(**a**) OptoGluNAM4.1 photoisomerization from *trans* to *cis* configuration after illumination with blue light. (**b**) Absorbance spectrum of OptoGluNAM4.1 (50 µM in DMSO) in dark (black line) and after illumination with 430 nm light (blue line) for 3 min or 630 nm light (red line) for 1 min. (**c**) Thermal isomerization of OptoGluNAM4.1 from *cis* to *trans* in dark (50 µM, PBS:DMSO 98:2) after a single ns laser pulse (t = 0) at λexc = 355 nm and 25°C. Solid thick red line corresponds to monoexponential fitting of the experimental data. (**d**) Time course of intracellular calcium in an $mGlu_4$-expressing HEK cell, challenged with the $mGlu_4$ agonist L-AP4 (0.3 µM, red bar) in absence or in presence of OptoGluNAM4.1 (10 µM, blue bar). Blue boxes indicate illumination at 430 nm. (**e**-**f**) Quantification of agonist (1 µM L-AP4) and light (λ = 430 nm) dependent $mGlu_4$ activation in presence of OptoGluNAM4.1 (e, 10 µM, n=12) or LY341495

(f, 100 µM, n=3) from results indicated in (**d**). Differences in receptor activation are significant compared to L-AP4 alone (maximum response) during application of OptoGluNAM4.1 under blue light ($p < 0.05$) and after the addition of L-AP4 ($p < 0.001$) but not when both L-AP4 and blue light are applied. No response was observed during LY341495 application in any condition. (**g**) Dose-response of L-AP4 during exposure to 430 nm-light in individual $mGlu_4$ expressing-cells, 30 minutes after treatment (and a subsequent thorough washing) with 30 µM of either OptoGluNAM4.1 or the –OH substituted compound 2. Mean ± SEM from at least two independent experiments indicated in Figure S2C. Data normalized to the maximum response obtained in each cell ($n \geq 5$). (**h**-**i**) Dose-response curves of L-AP4 after pre-treatment of cells with different concentrations of OptoGluNAM4.1 and subsequent washing both in dark and under blue light exposure, respectively. Each data point corresponds to mean ± SEM of at least 3 experiments.

Figure 3|OptoGluNAM4.1 is active in mouse and zebrafish animal models.

(**a**) Pharmacological modulation of spinal $mGlu_4$ receptors in chronic inflamed C57BL/6 mice by OptoGluNAM4.1 evaluated by the Von Frey method. The number of paw lifts from five stimulations using a noxious Von Frey filament is counted before and after inflammation (induced by CFA) and intrathecal treatment (IT). Animals were treated with vehicle (1% DMSO), LSP4-2022 (10µg/mice), OptoGluNAM4.1 (100µM) and LSP4-2022/ OptoGluNAM4.1 (10µg/mice and 100µM, respectively). All the results are expressed as mean ± SEM. (**b**) Quantification of the total accumulated free-swimming distance of the zebrafish larvae for every 5 minutes in presence or in the absence of OptoGluNAM4.1. (**c**) Quantification of the accumulated free-swimming distance of the zebrafish larvae for cycles of 1 min in dark or under blue light (430 nm) upon OptoGluNAM4.1 (10µM) treatment. (**d**) Zebrabox setup with the optogenetic module allowing for the very precise control of light conditions during behavioral experiments. Individual zebrafish larvae can be independently tracked in each well (scale bar 200 µm). For all zebrafish experiments, each data point corresponds to mean ± SEM of 12 animals from 2 independent experiments. Statistical differences from control are denoted for adjusted p-values as follows: *$P < 0.05$; **$P < 0.01$; ***$P < 0.001$; ****$P < 0.0001$.