Diabetic Visceral Hypersensitivity Is Associated with Activation of Mitogen-activated Kinase in Rat Dorsal Root Ganglia

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OBJECTIVE—Diabetic patients often experience visceral hypersensitivity and anorectal dysfunction. We hypothesize that the enhanced excitability of colon projecting dorsal root ganglia (DRG) neurons observed in diabetes is caused by a decrease in the amplitude of the transient A-type K+ (IA) currents resulting from increased phosphorylation of mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPK) and reduced opening of Kv4.2 channels.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS—We performed patch-clamp recordings of colon projecting DRG neurons from control and streptozotocin-induced diabetic (STZ-D) rats. Western blot analyses and immunocytochemistry studies were used to elucidate the intracellular signaling pathways that modulate the IA current. In vivo studies were performed to demonstrate that abnormal MAPK signaling is responsible for the enhanced visceromotor response to colorectal distention in STZ-D rats.

RESULTS—Patch-clamp studies demonstrated that IA current was diminished in the colon projecting DRG neurons of STZ-D rats. Western blot analysis of STZ-D DRG neurons revealed increases in phosphorylated MAPK and Kv4.2. In diabetic DRG neurons, increased intracellular Ca2+ ([Ca2+]i), protein kinase C (PKC), and MAPK were involved in the regulation of IA current through modulation of Kv4.2. Hypersensitive visceromotor responses to colorectal distention in STZ-D rats were normalized by administration of MAPK inhibitor U0126.

CONCLUSIONS—We demonstrated that reduction of the IA current in STZ-D DRG neurons is triggered by impaired [Ca2+]i ion homeostasis, and this in turn activates the PKC-MAPK pathways, resulting in decreased opening of the Kv4.2 channels. Hence, the PKC-MAPK–Kv4.2 pathways represent a potential therapeutic target for treating visceral hypersensitivity in diabetes.

Patients with long-standing diabetes often demonstrate visceral hypersensitivity and anorectal dysfunction. This may result in altered bowel habits, rectal urgency, and diarrhea (1–4). The pathophysiology of these conditions remains unclear. Previous studies suggest that diabetes-induced sensory neuropathies may be the consequence of increased activity of primary afferent fibers leading to an increased excitatory tone in the spinal cord (5). The spectrum of interacting ionic currents in different types of neurons appears to be important in determining the excitability of sensory neurons (6,7). The transient A-type K+ (IA) current is an important determinant of neuronal excitability. This current participates in the transduction of graded stimulating currents into graded firing rates (8). Kv4.2 channels, which are the primary molecular correlates of the IA current in sensory neurons, are prime targets for modulation (9,10).

Sensory neuropathies in diabetes are associated with abnormal signaling in the intracellular Ca2+ ([Ca2+])i pathway in the dorsal root ganglia (DRG) neurons. Enhanced influx of Ca2+ via multiple high-threshold Ca2+ currents and/or abnormal [Ca2+]))i uptake by endoplasmic reticulum occurs in sensory neurons of several models of diabetes (11–15). Increased [Ca2+])i signaling has also been implicated in the pathogenesis of a variety of neurodegenerative disorders (16). We hypothesize that diabetes is associated with Ca2+-mediated activation of mitogen-activated protein kinases (MAPK) that modulates the IA current in the DRG neurons. The reduction in IA current results in enhanced neural excitability, which may cause rectal hypersensitivity. To test this hypothesis, we examined how diabetes-evoked changes in [Ca2+])i, homeostasis modulate the excitability of distal colon projecting DRG neurons. We demonstrated that diabetic visceral hypersensitivity in the rectum is mediated by an abnormal IA current resulting from increased phosphorylation of MAPK in DRG neurons. This decreases the opening of Kv4.2 channels and reduces the amplitude of IA current. The increased neuronal excitability appears to be responsible for rectal hypersensitivity in diabetes.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

All procedures were performed in accordance with the National Institutes of Health guidelines and with the approval of the University Committee on Use and Care of Animals at the University of Michigan. Generation of streptozotocin-induced diabetic rats. Diabetes was induced in Sprague-Dawley rats (200 g) by an intraperitoneal injection of streptozotocin (STZ; 50 mg/kg) dissolved in sodium citrate buffer. Diabetes was confirmed 2–12 weeks later by measurement of tail vein blood glucose levels with Glucotest strips (Bayer Diagnostics, Puteaux, France). Only rats with a final blood glucose level ≥15 mmol/L (300 mg/dL) were included in the study. Control rats received only sodium citrate buffer. Retrograde tracing of DRG neurons. Normal (n = 11) and STZ-induced diabetic (STZ-D; n = 15) male rats were deeply anesthetized with a mixture of halothane in air, as described previously (17,18). After a laparotomy, the retrograde tracer Dil was applied to the distal colon. To confine the dye to the application site, Dil crystals were embedded in a fast-hardening epoxy resin that was allowed to harden for approximately 5 min. The wound was closed with nylon sutures (4-0). The animals were allowed to recover for a 15–20-day period before being killed for the harvesting of L6–S2 DRG neurons. Isolation and culture of DRG neurons. DRG neurons from L6–S2 spinal segments were surgically removed from rats anesthetized with ketamine (250 mg/kg) and xylazine (25 mg/kg). The ganglia were digested for 60 min at 37°C in Dulbecco’s modified Eagle’s media (DMEM; Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA) containing 1 mg/mL dispase (Roche, Nutley, NJ) and 1 mg/mL collagenase type I (Invitrogen). Neurons were dispersed by gentle trituration through Pasteur pipettes and washed with DMEM. Droplets of media containing isolated DRG neurons were then transferred to a 35 mm petri dish containing 2 mL of warm fresh DMEM containing 10% horse serum (Hyclone, Logan, UT).
neurons were transferred onto coverslips coated with poly-L-lysine for 30 min. To mimic the ambient glucose concentrations in control and diabetic rats, isolated DRG neurons from control and STZ-D rats were maintained in 5 or 15 mmol/L glucose containing DMEM/F12 media, respectively, supplemented with 10% fetal calf serum (Invitrogen) and gentamycin (100 units/mL; Invitrogen) at 37°C in a 5% CO2 atmosphere. Electrophysiological recordings on primary neuron cultures were performed within 24 h.

Patch-clamp electrophysiology. Labeled DRG neurons were identified using a Nikon Ti-S microscope equipped with TRITC epifluorescence filters. Whole-cell or perforated patch recordings were performed using borosilicate glass electrodes with resistance between 3 and 6 mol/L (A-M Systems, Sequim, WA) backfilled with a saline solution composed of 130 mmol/L potassium gluconate, 10 mmol/L HEPES, 10 mmol/L EDTA, 1.0 mmol/L MgCl2, 2.5 mmol/L CaCl2, 1.0 mmol/L adenosine triphosphate, and 0.5 mmol/L guanosine triphosphate. Current and voltage recordings were obtained from discrete isolated DRG neurons using the Axopatch 200B patch-clamp amplifier (Axon Instruments, Foster City, CA). The signals were digitized using the analog-to-digital converter Digidata 1322B (Axon Instruments) and then stored and analyzed on a personal computer running pClamp 10 software. The membrane resistance of DRG neurons was calculated in current clamp mode by measuring membrane potential changes in response to the current step of 20-pA amplitude and lasting 500 ms. The resting membrane potential (Vm) of each cell was recorded from the voltage meter in current clamp mode at the beginning of each experiment. An action potential (AP) was evoked by injecting depolarizing current pulses while keeping the DRG neurons at approximately −60 mV by a constant current injection. The amplitude of command current was increased in 10-pA increments until it reached sufficient intensity to initiate an AP. AP duration was measured at half-peak amplitude. The amplitudes were measured in voltage clamp mode. IfIs was evoked by a hyperpolarizing voltage command to −130 mV from a holding potential of −60 mV. IfIs was evoked on repolarization to a holding potential (−60 mV) from the test hyperpolarization to −130 mV. The amplitude was measured at its peak current.

Measurement of [Ca2+]i. Dil-labeled neurons were identified by the intracellular presence of red label using TRITC filter. These DRG neurons plated on glass coverslips were incubated in PS containing 2 µmol/L Fura-2-acetoxymethyl ester (Molecular Probes, Eugene, OR) for 15 min at 37°C. The dish volume was subsequently reduced to 0.5 mL, and the cells were equilibrated in PS at a flow rate of 1 mL/min in a heated chamber (30–33°C). After >10 min, the fluorescence of individual DRG neurons was elicited by alternating excitation wavelengths of 340 and 380 nm (Till Polychrome V; Till Photonics, Gräfelfing, Germany) using a 410-dlp beam splitter and a D610/80-wide band emission filter. Neuron images were captured at 510 nm using a Nikon camera. The camera and monochromator were controlled by NIS-Elements imaging software, and the concentrations of [Ca2+]i were calculated online. The software allows subtraction of background fluorescence. The actual [Ca2+]i was calculated from the ratio of fluorescence recorded at excitation wavelengths of 340 and 380 nm.

Western blot analyses. DRG neurons from L6–S2 were lysed and centrifuged at 14,000 g for 10 min. Protein samples were then run on Ready Gel 12% Tris-HCl for 1.5 h at 80 V. Proteins were then transferred to nitrocellulose membranes for 1 h at 80 V. The membranes were blocked with StarBlot block buffer T20 for 1 h at room temperature, probed with primary antibodies that recognize either anti-MAPK or anti-phospho-p44/42 MAPK (extracellular signal-regulated kinase [Erk1/2] after activation by dual phosphorylation at Thr202/Tyr204 (Cell Signaling Technology, Danvers, MA). The latter studies were performed at 1:1,000 dilution at 4°C overnight and then washed in Tris-buffered saline with 0.1% Tween for 1 h. To measure the levels of K,4.2 channels, we used anti-K,4.2 or anti-phospho-K,4.2, which detects phosphorylation on Thr202 (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Inc., Santa Cruz, CA) at 1:1,000 dilution at 4°C overnight and then washed in Tris-buffered saline with 0.1% Tween for 1 h. The membranes were probed with corresponding horseradish peroxidase–conjugated secondary antibody (1:2,000 dilution). Protein bands were detected with enhanced chemiluminescence Western blotting reagents (Thermo Fisher Scientific, Rockford, IL). The resulting bands were scanned with an Epson 2400 printer and analyzed using the ImageJ program.

Immunohistochemistry studies. Immunohistochemistry studies to localize MAPK/Erk1/2, K,4.2, and neurofilament marker (NF200) were performed in L6–S2 DRG neurons from control rats (n = 3) and STZ-D rats (6–8 weeks after induction of diabetes; n = 3). After anesthesia with urethane, a transcardial perfusion was performed with ice-cold, heparinized PBS and subsequently with a fixative containing 3% paraformaldehyde, 0.2% picric acid, and 0.35% glutaraldehyde in phosphate buffer (0.1 mol/L, pH 7.4). The DRG neurons were removed and placed in the same fixative for 2 h at room temperature and then in 25% sucrose in PBS (0.1 mol/L) overnight at 4°C. Sections (5–10 µmol/L) of the DRG neurons were incubated in 5% normal donkey serum in PBS for 1 h at room temperature. Labeling was performed using mouse monoclonal anti-K,4.2 (K57/1; University of California at Davis, NIH Neuro-Mab facility, Davis, CA) dilution 1:500 and rabbit anti-phospho-K,4.2 (K57/1) (Erk1/2) (Thr202/Tyr204; Cell Signaling Technology) at 1:1,000 dilution at 4°C overnight and then washed in 25% sucrose in PBS (0.1 mol/L) overnight at 4°C. Sections (5–10 µmol/L) of the DRG neurons were incubated in 5% normal donkey serum in PBS for 1 h at room temperature. Labeling was performed using mouse monoclonal anti-K,4.2 (K57/1; University of California at Davis, NIH Neuro-Mab facility, Davis, CA) dilution 1:500 and rabbit anti-phospho-p44/42 MAPK (Thr202/Tyr204; Cell Signaling Technology) at 1:1,000 dilution. The primary antibodies were diluted in PBS containing 2% normal donkey serum and 0.3% Triton X-100, and tissues were incubated overnight at room temperature. The tissues were washed in PBS and exposed for 1 h to species-specific AlexaFluor 488 (Molecular Probes) or cyanine 3-conjugated secondary antibodies (Jackson ImmunoResearch Laboratories, West Grove, PA) diluted with PBS containing 0.3% Triton X-100. Specificity of immunohistochemical labeling was verified with the omission of primary antibodies, and staining was performed using only secondary antibodies. The sections were coverslipped and then sealed.

Visceromotor responses to graded colorectal distention. Measurement of visceral sensitivity in animals was mainly based on brain stem reflexes, which have been described as pseudoafffective responses (19). The visceromotor responses were recorded by quantifying a reflex contraction of the abdominal musculature induced by colorectal distention (CRD). The animals were anesthetized with a mixture of xylazine and ketamine (13 and 87 mg/kg body wt, respectively). Electromyography electrodes were implanted into the external oblique pelvic muscles 4–6 days before the beginning of the experimental procedures. The skin was sutured over the strain gauge, and the lead wires were looped around the animal’s flank and secured with a single suture in the skin. During the experiment, the strain gauge was connected by way of a shielded cable to a chart recorder to monitor the number of abdominal muscle contractions. A latex balloon (7 cm long) was inserted into the colon through the rectum. Graded-pressure CRD was produced by rapidly injecting warm saline (37°C) into the colonic balloon over 1 s and maintaining the distention for 20 s. Pressure was regulated with a distention control device and monitored by use of a pressure transducer. Graded-intensity stimulation trials (20–40–60–80 mmHg CRD) were conducted to establish stimulus-response

| TABLE 1 | Statistical analyses of the three different DRG neuronal types |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------|----------------|
| H-type | A-type | A–H type |
| Rm (Ω) | 162 ± 28† | 255 ± 55* | 373 ± 70* |
| Vm (mV) | 61.2 ± 0.7 | 62.1 ± 1.8 | 61.6 ± 1.5 |
| AP | | | |
| Amplitude (nV) | 92 ± 4.5 | 90.1 ± 3.7 | 98 ± 8.4 |
| Duration at 50% (ms) | 1.3 ± 0.3‡ | 2.2 ± 0.4* | 3.6 ± 1.0* |
| Threshold (pA) | 240 ± 59¶ | 54 ± 19* | 238 ± 86* |
| Amplitude (pA) | | | |
| If | 353 ± 61* | Not detected* | 62 ± 17* |
| If | Not detected* | 411 ± 57* | 54 ± 14* |
| Size (µm) | 40.7 ± 7.3 | 29 ± 3.2 | 20 ± 1.5* |
| | 40 (32/80) | 45 (36/80) | 15 (12/80) |

Results are expressed as mean ± SE. The significance of differences was determined with the Student t test, assuming unequal variance (P < 0.05), from three different experiments. *Significantly different from H-type; †Significantly different from A-type.
FIG. 2. Effects of STZ-induced diabetes on the amplitude of $I_A$ current in A-type DRG neurons. A: Representative recordings of $I_A$ currents in control and STZ-D DRG neurons. B: Summary histogram shows that the amplitude of $I_A$ current normalized to cell capacitance ($C_m$) was significantly reduced in STZ-D (6–8 weeks after the induction of diabetes; $n = 28$) neurons compared with controls ($n = 24$). *$P < 0.05$ compared with aged-matched controls. C: Normalized $I_A$ amplitude-voltage relationships demonstrate that STZ-D ($n = 11$) did not affect inactivation curve compared with control ($n = 11$).

curves. Each distention trial consisted of three segments: a 20-s predistention baseline period, a 20-s distention period, and a 20-s post-CRD termination period with a 4-min interstimulus interval. The responses were considered stable if there was less than 20% variability between two consecutive trials of CRD at 60 mmHg. The results of electromyography were amplified and filtered (5,000×; 300–5,000 Hz; A-M Systems), digitized, and integrated by using the SPIKE2/CED 1401 data-acquisition interface. Spike bursts higher than 0.3 mV were regarded as significant and were, therefore, used to estimate the pain response.

Visceromotor responses were performed in both control and U0126-treated rats. U0126 was administered either intravenously (10 μg/kg) or intrathecally (5 μg in 0.5 μl of saline). For intrathecal administration, rats were anesthetized, and a 25-gauge, 1-inch needle connected to a 20-μl Hamilton syringe was inserted into the subarachnoid space between lumbar vertebral S1 and S2 until a tail-flick was elicited. The syringe was held in the position for a few seconds after injection.

Statistical analysis. Data were presented as mean ± SEM; $n$ is the number of samples. The software package InStat 3 (GraphPad Software, Inc., San Diego, CA) was used for data analysis. χ² tests were used for analyses of contingency tables with more than three categories. For analysis of differences between means, one-way ANOVA with Student-Newman-Keuls test was used. Results were considered statistically significant when $P < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Basic electrophysiological properties of DRG neurons. Whole-cell recordings were obtained from 80 DRG neurons, 45 of which were labeled after placement of DiI in the distal colon. DRG neurons were divided into three groups on the basis of expression of fast inactivation of $I_A$ and $I_H$ currents. The H-type neurons, comprising 45% of the total population of isolated DRG neurons, were characterized as a group of neurons that expressed $I_H$ and no $I_A$ current. In comparison, the A-type neurons (40%) expressed $I_A$ and no $I_H$ current, and the A–H-type group (15%) expressed both $I_H$ and $I_A$ currents (Fig. 1). The general electrophysiological properties of these three groups of neurons are provided in Table 1.

No significant differences in neuronal properties were observed between DiI-labeled and nonlabeled neurons (data not shown).

Effect of diabetes on $I_A$ current in DRG neurons. Among the three groups of distal colon projecting neurons, only A-type neurons appeared to be affected by diabetes as demonstrated in STZ-D rats (6–8 weeks after induction of diabetes) (Fig. 2A). The density of $I_A$ current was significantly smaller in STZ-D A-type neurons when compared with controls (Fig. 2B). STZ-D did not alter the $I_A$ current-voltage relationship (Fig. 2C).

Increase in phosphorylation of MAPK(Erk1/2) and Kv4.2 in diabetic DRG neurons. The Kv4.2 channel that mediates the $I_A$ current is specifically phosphorylated at Thr602 by MAPK(Erk1/2), resulting in decreased opening of the channel and neuronal depolarization (20,21). We investigated whether the phosphorylation of MAPK isoforms Erk1/2 and Kv4.2 were enhanced with the development of diabetes. Immunoblot analysis with specific anti-phospho-44/42 MAPK(Erk1/2) and anti-phospho-Kv4.2 revealed a progressive increase in the levels of phosphorylation of MAPK(Erk1/2) and Kv4.2 in diabetic DRG neurons. At 8 weeks, the phosphorylated-MAPK (p-MAPK) and phosphorylated-Kv4.2 (p-Kv4.2) levels were 240 ± 19 and 265 ± 31% above the levels in nondiabetic age-matched DRG neurons ($P < 0.05$; Fig. 3). In contrast, the levels of nonphosphorylated Kv4.2 did not change with
diabetes (Fig. 7C). Immunocytochemistry showed that a large population of DRG neurons from control rats expressed the Kv4.2 channel (Fig. 4A-C). However, only a small fraction (3 ± 1%) of DRG neurons from the control group was immunoreactive to anti-p-MAPK(Erk1/2). This finding is consistent with that reported by Averill et al. (22). In STZ-D rats (8 weeks after induction of diabetes), the number of p-MAPK immunoreactive neurons was ~12 times higher (36 ± 5%) compared with that in control rats (Fig. 4D; P < 0.05). These findings indicate that phosphorylation of MAPK(Erk1/2) and Kv4.2 occurs in diabetic DRG neurons, raising the possibility that this pathway may be involved in the pathogenesis of diabetic sensory neuropathy.

**[Ca2+]i modulates the amplitude of the IA current.**

Studies from animal models of diabetes and from diabetic patients reveal that [Ca2+]i is increased in most tissues, including DRG neurons (11,20). To confirm and expand these observations, we measured the levels of resting [Ca2+]i in retrograde-labeled DRG neurons isolated from control and STZ-D rats. The level of [Ca2+]i was significantly increased in DRG neurons from STZ-D rats, 8 weeks after the induction of diabetes (Fig. 5A). We next investigated the effects of [Ca2+]i on the amplitude of IA current. Application of ionomycin (1 μmol/L), a Ca2+ ionophore, inhibited the amplitude of IA by ~50% in normal retrograde-labeled DRG neurons (Fig. 5B and C). In contrast, superfusion of retrograde-labeled DRG neurons with Ca2+-free solution resulted in an increase of the IA amplitude (Fig. 5D). These findings indicated that [Ca2+]i modulates the amplitude of IA. We next examined the hypothesis that increased [Ca2+]i acts via PKC to cause a reduction in the amplitude of IA current. Retrograde-labeled A-type DRG neurons from normal rats were dialyzed with a specific PKC inhibitor, calphostin C (5 μmol/L), for 10–15 min (n = 4). At the concentration of 5 μmol/L, calphostin C acts as a specific inhibitor of PKC, which interacts with the protein's regulatory domain by competing at the binding site of diacylglycerol and phorbol ester. Calphostin C effectively blocked the inhibitory effect of ionomycin, suggesting that [Ca2+]i inhibits IA current via a PKC-activated pathway (Fig. 5E).

**Intracellular pathways responsible for modulation of IA current.**

Patch-clamp whole-cell recordings of isolated distal colon projecting neurons showed that extracellular application of phospholipase C (PLC) activator (1 μmol/L; n = 6) inhibited the amplitude of IA by 82% (P < 0.05). PLC activator is a novel sulfonamide compound that acts as a cell permeable-specific activator of PLC. The effect of the PLC activator was markedly attenuated by inclusion of calphostin C (1 μmol/L; n = 6), a selective PKC inhibitor, into the recording electrode (Fig. 5F). Furthermore, we demonstrated that PKC activation by phorbol 12-myristate 13-acetate (PMA; 1 μmol/L; n = 5), a phorbol ester, inhibited the amplitude of IA by 97% (P < 0.05). The effect of PMA was blocked by simultaneous application of the MAPK kinase inhibitor PD98059 (1 μmol/L; n = 4; Fig. 5F) or U0126 (5 μmol/L; n = 3; data not shown). These data led us to conclude that the activation of the PKC-MAPK pathway by increased [Ca2+]i leads to subsequent inhibition of the amplitude of IA current.

**MAPK kinase inhibitor restores the amplitude of IA in diabetic DRG neurons.** If the activation of MAPK is a necessary step for the phosphorylation of the Kv4.2
channel leading to inhibition of $I_A$ current (22,23), inhibition of this protein kinase cascade should attenuate the effects of STZ-induced diabetes on the amplitude of $I_A$. To show that MAPK is involved in diabetes-induced reduction of $I_A$ amplitude, we examined the effects of MAPK kinase (MEK) inhibitor U0126 on Dil-labeled DGR neurons obtained from STZ-D rats 8 weeks after the induction of diabetes. Extracellular superfusion of U0126 (5 μmol/L; n = 5) significantly increased the amplitude of $I_A$ (260 ± 23%; P < 0.05; Fig. 6A and B). To demonstrate the role of a K₄,2 subunit in the mediation of $I_A$ current, we measured the levels of both p-MAPK and p-K₄,2 before and after application of U0126. Western blot analyses showed that 15-min treatment of STZ-D DRG primary neuronal cultures with U0126 (5 μmol/L; n = 4) significantly decreased the levels of both p-MAPK and p-K₄,2 compared with untreated cultures (Fig. 6C). Similar results were obtained with another MAPK kinase inhibitor PD98059 (data not shown).

**In vivo administration of a MAPK inhibitor normalizes colorectal hypersensitivity in diabetic rats.** To provide direct evidence that MAPKs contribute to the development of visceral hypersensitivity in the distal colon of diabetic rats, visceromotor responses to CRD were studied in nor-mal (n = 6), STZ-D (8 weeks after STZ injection; n = 6), and U0126-treated STZ-D rats (n = 6). A significant increase in visceromotor responses occurred in STZ-D rats compared with control rats after CRD of 20, 40, and 60 mmHg. We used U0126 to inhibit MAPK activity in the DRG neurons, but not in the central neurons. U0126 does not cross the blood-brain barrier, but it can access DRG neuron somas and afferent fibers (24). Intravenous injection of U0126 (10 μg/kg; n = 6) in STZ-D rats significantly suppressed visceromotor responses to CRD within 15 min (Fig. 7A; $P < 0.05$). Similar results were obtained with intrathecal administration of U0126 (5 μg in 0.5 μl saline; Fig. 7B; $P < 0.05$). In contrast, intravenous injection of U0124, an inactive form of U0126, did not have any significant effect on the enhanced visceromotor responses to CRD in STZ-D rats (n = 3; data not shown). We also showed that intravenous administration of U0126 markedly reduced phosphorylation of Erk1/2 and K₄,2 in L6–S2 DRG neurons (Fig. 7). These data indicate that activation of the MEK-MAPK/ERK pathway in DRG neurons plays an important role in the mediation of visceral hypersensitivity induced by diabetes.

**DISCUSSION**

It is well established that the diabetic state can increase the excitability of nociceptive afferents, resulting in painful diabetic neuropathy and mechanical allodynia in diabetic patients, as well as in diabetic animal models (3). On the other hand, it also has been reported that diabetes impairs the detection of lower intensity cutaneous stimuli. This effect is mediated by pelvic afferent nerve endings, which underlie low-threshold mechanosensitivity (1). The different effects of diabetes in different groups of DRG neurons and the variable duration of diabetes used in different studies may contribute to these seemingly opposite findings. The descending colon and rectum in the rat are innervated by visceral afferents that project in the pelvic (parasympathetic) nerve to the L6–S2 spinal segments (17,25). In this study, we showed that visceromotor responses to CRD were significantly higher in STZ-D rats 8 weeks after the induction of diabetes. This observation was consistent with our in vitro observations using isolated distal...
colon projecting DRG neurons, suggesting the development of visceral hypersensitivity.

Our electrophysiological data indicate the presence of distinct populations of DRG neurons that probably serve different physiological functions. Variation in $I_{\text{H}}, I_{\text{IR}}$ (inward rectifying), and $I_{\text{leak}}$ currents has been observed in DRG neurons of different sizes (6,7). Our data also indicated that small- and medium-sized DRG neurons preferentially express $I_A$ current. These small- and medium-sized DRG neurons are the primary sensory neurons responsible for pain sensation (9,26). Our STZ-D rat model showed that A-type DRG neurons were affected by diabetes, resulting in the reduction of the amplitude of $I_A$ current and enhanced excitability.

Peripheral axons and somas of sensory DRG neurons exist outside the protection of the blood–nerve barrier; thus, they are directly exposed to the high glucose levels in diabetes (5). Schneider et al. (27) reported that hyperglycemia increased the depolarizing after-potentials that caused hyperexcitability of sensory DRG neurons. Our studies further identified that $I_A$ currents were reduced in diabetic DRG neurons.

Several studies have shown that the level of cytosolic Ca$^{2+}$ increases with the onset of diabetes (12–15). It has been suggested that elevation of the [Ca$^{2+}$]i level observed in spinal sensory neurons in rodent models of diabetes is the result of increased Ca$^{2+}$ release from internal stores and impaired Ca$^{2+}$ resequestration (14,15). Diabetes is also associated with increased amplitude in multiple voltage–dependent Ca$^{2+}$ currents (13–15). Disturbances in the homeostasis of [Ca$^{2+}$]i have been proposed to be a common pathway in the pathogenesis of neurologic complications of diabetes (12). Our studies showed that the level of [Ca$^{2+}$]i was significantly increased in diabetic DRG neurons, and this was associated with a reduction of $I_A$ current.

We propose that reduction of $I_A$ current in DRG neurons of STZ-D rat is triggered by impaired [Ca$^{2+}$]i homeostasis and activation of the PKC-MAPK pathway reducing the opening of K$_V$4.2 channels. This hypothesis was supported by experiments showing that administration of a MAPK kinase inhibitor normalized the levels of p-MAPK and p-K$_V$4.2 and restored the amplitude of $I_A$.

The expression of MAPKs is altered by high glucose and oxidative stress in cultured sensory neurons from diabetic rats (28–30). Activation of MAPK plays a key role in the
regulation of central sensitization resulting in long-term pain hypersensitivity (30,31,32). Daulhac et al. (33) reported that the development of mechanical hyperalgesia, a symptom of diabetic neuropathy, in STZ-D rats correlated with an increase in MAPK phosphorylation in the spinal cord and DRG neurons. However, it is unknown whether this abnormal intracellular signaling occurs in visceral hypersensitive state in diabetic rat models. We confirmed and expanded these observations to DRG neurons innervating the distal colon and showed that increased levels of both p-MAPK/Erk1/2 and p-Kv4.2 were detected as early as the 8th week and increased with the progression of diabetes. Furthermore, we showed that stimulation of the MAPK-PKC pathway reduced the opening of Kv4.2 channels, resulting in a reduction of IA current and increased excitability. This finding should be contrasted with a recent study by Cao et al. (34) who reported that a decrease in IA current was accompanied by a decreased gene expression in K,4.2 in painful diabetic neuropathy. Our studies showed similar reduction of IA current but an increase in phosphorylated K,4.2 and no change in total protein expression. It is not uncommon that the levels of mRNA do not always correlate with the protein levels.

We provide direct evidence that MAPK contribute to the development of visceral hypersensitivity in diabetic rats. Eight weeks after the induction of diabetes, significant increase in visceromotor responses occurred in STZ-D rats after CRD of 20, 40, and 60 mmHg. This indicates the development of allodynia and hyperalgesia with a time course consistent with the increased expression of phosphorylated MAPK and K,4.2. Most importantly, the enhanced visceromotor responses to colorectal distension in STZ-D rats were normalized by intravenous as well as intrathecal administration of the MAPK inhibitor U0126. It is interesting to note that systemic administration of U0126 in diabetic rats reduced VMR to values below those observed in normal rats. This suggests that the PKC-MAPK pathways in the DRG may play an important role to regulate rectal sensitivity even under normal physiological conditions.

In conclusion, we provide evidence for the first time that diabetic visceral hypersensitivity is mediated by abnormal IA current resulting from increased phosphorylation of MAPK and K,4.2 in DRG neurons. Our in vitro studies also provide evidence that increased [Ca2+]i contributes to DRG neuronal excitability by activation of the PKC-MAPK pathway, resulting in decreased opening of K,4.2 channels. These data suggest that the PKC-MAPK pathway represents a potential therapeutic target for the treatment of visceral hypersensitivity in diabetes.
FIG. 7. In vivo demonstration that the MAPK cascade is involved in the modulation of visceromotor responses to CRD in control and STZ-D rats. A and B: Summary histogram shows that visceromotor responses to CRD (20–60 mmHg) were significantly elevated in STZ-D rats. Enhanced visceromotor responses to CRD were normalized by intravenous (A) and intrathecal (5 μg in 0.5 μl; B) administration of U0126 in the STZ-D rats (n = 6 and n = 4, respectively). Data are presented as means ± SE. *P < 0.05 compared with control rats; #P < 0.05 compared with the STZ-D before U0126 treatment. C: Western blots show that intravenous administration of U0126 reduced the levels of p-MAPK and p-Kv4.2 but not total MAPK or Kv4.2 in both control and STZ-D rats. The immunoblot is representative of four experiments. D: Summary histogram shows the effect of intravenous U0126 on the levels of p-MAPK and p-Kv4.2 (n = 4) in control and STZ-D rats. *P < 0.05 compared with DRG neurons from control rats.

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