Gambogic amide, a selective agonist for TrkA receptor that possesses robust neurotrophic activity, prevents neuronal cell death

Sung-Wuk Jang*, Masashi Okada*, Iqbal Sayeed†, Ge Xiao‡, Donald Stein‡, Peng Jin§, and Keqiang Ye*‖

Departments of *Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, †Emergency Medicine, and ‡Human Genetics, Emory University School of Medicine, Atlanta, GA 30322; and †Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Inorganic Toxicology Laboratory, 4770 Buford Highway, Mail Stop F-18, Atlanta, GA 30341

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Nerve growth factor (NGF) binds to TrkA receptor and triggers activation of numerous signaling cascades, which play critical roles in neuronal plasticity, survival, and neurite outgrowth. To mimic NGF functions pharmacologically, we developed a high-throughput screening assay to identify small-molecule agonists for TrkA receptor. The most potent compound, gambogic amide, selectively binds to TrkA, but not TrkB or TrkC, and robustly induces its tyrosine phosphorylation and downstream signaling activation, including Akt and MAPKs. Further, it strongly prevents glutamate-induced neuronal cell death and provokes prominent neurite outgrowth in PC12 cells. Gambogic amide specifically interacts with the cytoplasmic juxtamembrane domain of TrkA receptor and triggers its dimerization. Administration of this molecule in mice substantially diminishes kainic acid-triggered neuronal cell death and decreases infarct volume in the transient middle cerebral artery occlusion model of stroke. Thus, gambogic amide might not only establish a powerful platform for dissection of the physiological roles of NGF and TrkA receptor but also provide effective treatments for neurodegenerative diseases and stroke.

N   europotrophins play an essential role in the development and maintenance of the peripheral nervous system and CNS. The receptors for neurotrophins are members of a family of highly similar transmembrane tyrosine kinases (TrkA, TrkB, and TrkC). Each neurotrophin binds to a preferred receptor in the family: Nerve growth factor (NGF) binds mainly TrkA, brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) and neurotrophin-4 bind TrkB, and neurotrophin-3 binds TrkC, whereas p75NTR receptor nonselectively interacts with all members of the neurotrophins with similar affinity. Docking of TrkA by NGF initiates receptor dimerization, phosphorylation of cytoplasmic tyrosine residues on the receptor, and a cascade of cell-signaling events, including activation of phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase (PI3-kinase)/Akt, MAPK, and phospholipase C-γ1 signaling pathways (1). These signals lead to the prevention of apoptotic cell death, promotion of cellular differentiation and axon elongation, and up-regulation of choline acetyl transferase. Several neuronal cell types implicated in various diseases express TrkA and therefore respond to NGF (2). In neurodegenerative processes such as mild cognitive impairment, loss of TrkA density correlates with neuronal atrophy and precedes neuronal death and severe cognitive impairment in Alzheimer’s disease (AD) (3). In mild cognitive impairment and AD progression, loss of TrkA correlates with cognitive decline. In basal forebrain neurons of the aged rat, the expression of NGF receptors is decreased, but can be reversed by NGF administration (4). It has been suggested that NGF therapy may delay the onset of AD (5, 6) and ameliorate peripheral diabetic neuropathies (7). Both in vitro and animal model studies demonstrate that NGF might be clinically useful for treatment of CNS diseases (8). Preclinical and clinical findings also suggest that s.c. or i.v. administration of neurotrophins may be an effective treatment for peripheral neurodegenerative disorders (9, 10). Despite the therapeutic potential of NGF, clinical trials have been disappointing (11), which is due to inherent drawbacks associated with the use of polypeptides applied as drugs (12), in vivo instability (5), and pleiotropic effects. To circumvent these curbs, substantial efforts have been made to design small, proteolytically stable molecules with neurotrophic activity, selective for cells expressing TrkA (12–14). They present partial agonistic activity in the absence of NGF by activating TrkA. Although they do not directly dimerize the receptor, the compounds cause conformational changes on TrkA that stabilize its dimerization. Thus, they act more as potentiators of NGF action, rather than as robust TrkA agonists.

Gambogic acid (GA) is the major active ingredient of gamboge, a brownish to orange resin exuded from the Garcinia hanburyi tree in southeast Asia. The resin has been used in traditional Chinese medicine for the treatment of cancers (15). It has potent anticaner activity because of its activation of the apoptotic pathways in cancerous cells (16–19). Recently, it has been reported that GA triggers apoptosis upon binding to the transferrin receptor (20).

Here we describe a cell-based chemical genetic screen for TrkA agonists. We found that gambogic amide selectively binds to TrkA, triggers its tyrosine phosphorylation, elicits PI3-kinase/Akt and MAPK activation, provokes neurite outgrowth in PC12 cells, and prevents neuronal cell death. Moreover, it substantially decreases the infarct volume after middle cerebral artery occlusion (MCAO). Thus, gambogic amide mimics NGF and possesses potent neurotrophic activities.

Results

A Cell-Based Screen for TrkA-Expressing Cells. To identify small molecules that mimic NGF and activate TrkA, we developed a cell-based apoptotic assay by using a cell-permeant fluorescent dye, MR(DEVD)−, which turns red upon caspase-3 cleavage in apoptotic cells. We used a murine cell line T17, which was derived from basal forebrain SN56 cells. T17 cells are TrkA stably transfected SN56 cells. The candidates selectively protecting T17 cells, but not SN56 cells, from the first screen are then subjected to neurite outgrowth assay for the second screen. The positive compounds were analyzed for TrkA tyrosine phosphorylation, Akt, and MAPK signaling cascade activation. The screening strategy scheme is
GA binds the Cytoplasmic Juxtamembrane Domain of TrkA Receptor. The Ig-like domain (TrkA-d5 domain) in the extracellular region of TrkA proximal to the membrane is required for specific binding of NGF (21). To investigate which portion of TrkA receptor binds to gambogic amide, we conducted an in vitro binding assay with immobilized gambogic amide through covalent linkage of Affi-Gel 102. We generated numerous GFP-tagged TrkA truncates and transfected them into HEK293 cells. The binding assay showed that the extracellular domain was not required for the association (Fig. 1A). Interestingly, the cytoplasmic juxtamembrane domain was critical for the ligand binding (Fig. 1B). Although the intracellular domain (ICD) of Trk family members shares great homology, the juxtamembrane regions are different among the members (Fig. 1C). We conducted an in vitro binding assay using Affi-Gel 102 coupled to GA through amide bond and found that gambogic amide selectively bound to both wild-type and kinase-dead TrkA, but not to TrkB or TrkC. Noticeably, TrkA-KD exhibited weaker affinity to gambogic amide than did wild-type TrkA (Fig. 1D Upper). It did not bind to p75NTR, ErbB3, or EGF receptor (data not shown), underscoring the finding that gambogic amide specifically associates with TrkA, but not other neurotrophin receptors or transmembrane tyrosine kinase receptors. To determine the binding constant between GA and TrkA, we conducted a competition assay with GFP-GA-bound gambogic amide beads. The beads-associated TrkA was gradually decreased as the free gambogic amide concentrations increased. In contrast, the inactive GA derivatives failed. Quantitative analysis of the competition data revealed that the $K_d$ for GA-TrkA-associated gambogic amide beads were incubated with increased gambogic amide and various GA derivatives. After extensive washing, the beads-bound proteins were monitored by immunoblotting and quantitated by National Institutes of Health Image software. The $K_d$ for the gambogic amide to TrkA is $\sim 75$ nM. The inactive control GA derivatives did not compete for binding at all (Student’s t test; *, $P < 0.05$). (F) FITC-gambogic amide penetrates cell membrane and binds to TrkA receptor. PC12 cells were incubated for 10 min with 0.5 $\mu$M FITC-gambogic amide and control FITC, respectively. (Upper) After washing and fixing, the cells were stained with TrkA antibody. (Lower) Depletion of SHC drug-binding domain abolishes GA-FITC membrane penetration.

depicted in supporting information (SI) Fig. 6. Using the caspase-3-activated fluorescent dye as a visual assay, we screened 2,000 biologically active compounds from the Spectrum Collection Library. Thirty-one compounds selectively protected T17 cells, but not SN56 cells, from staurosporine-initiated apoptosis, indicating that these compounds might act either directly through TrkA receptor or its downstream signaling effectors. The positive compounds were further validated by an independent cell viability assay (data not shown).
Gambogic Amide Selectively Protects TrkA Expression Cells and Primary Neurons from Apoptosis.

Gambogic Amide Selectively Protects TrkA Expression Cells and Primary Neurons from Apoptosis. NGF binds to receptor TrkA and elicits its dimerization and autophosphorylation on tyrosine residues. Numerous tyrosine residues on TrkA are phosphorylated upon NGF stimulation. For example, Y490 phosphorylation is required for Src association and activation of MAPK signaling cascade. Y751 phosphorylation is essential for PI3-kinase docking and activation. To evaluate whether GA compounds also could trigger TrkA tyrosine phosphorylation, we treated primary hippocampal neurons with various drugs at 0.5 μM for 30 min. NGF induced potent TrkA phosphorylation. Surprisingly, only gambogic amide, but not other compounds, elicited TrkA phosphorylation (Fig. 3A Upper). Gambogic amide also initiated the pronounced TrkA tyrosine phosphorylation in hippocampal neurons, as demonstrated by immunofluorescent staining with anti-TrkA Y490-specific antibody (Fig. 3B). In addition, gambogic amide triggered Y751 tyrosine phosphorylation. Both Y490 and Y751 phosphorylation by NGF can be completely inhibited by 30 nM K252a, a TrkA tyrosine kinase inhibitor. K252a also can substantially decrease TrkA phosphorylation elicited by gambogic amide (Fig. 3C), which indicates that the stimulatory effect by gambogic amide is mainly mediated through TrkA autophosphorylation. A coimmunoprecipitation assay demonstrated that gambogic amide provoked TrkA dimerization even more strongly than NGF, whereas GA and DMSO failed to do so. By contrast, the cotransfected TrkB and TrkA receptors failed to dimerize regardless of NGF or gambogic amide treatment (Fig. 3D). Gambogic amide also elicited tyrosine phosphorylation in TrkB, but not in TrkB or TrkC receptor. TrkA-KD displayed negligible tyrosine phosphorylation compared with wild-type TrkA (Fig. 3E), indicating that TrkA autophosphorylation activated by gambogic amide contribute to Y490 phosphorylation. An in vitro binding assay with Affi-Gel 102-conjugated GA derivatives, which form an amide bond between GAs and NH2-Affi-Gel 102, revealed that only GA selectively associated with TrkA, but not TrkB or TrkC (Fig. 3F). GA and gambogic amide provoked Erk1/2 phosphorylation, but failed to activate Akt in TrkB-stable cells (Fig. 3G). Similar effects occurred to TrkC-stable cells. GA derivatives failed to initiate TrkB or TrkC tyrosine phosphorylation (data not shown). Hence, these results demonstrate that gambogic amide mimics NGF and selectively provokes TrkA dimerization and tyrosine phosphorylation.

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Fig. 3. Gambogic amide elicits TrkA tyrosine phosphorylation in hippocampal neurons. (A) Gambogic amide induces TrkA tyrosine phosphorylation in primary neurons. Immunoblotting analysis with anti-phospho-TrkA490 of hippocampal neurons treated with 0.5 μM GA derivatives for 30 min. (B) Immunofluorescent staining of GA derivative-treated hippocampal neurons with anti-phospho-TrkA490 antibody. Both NGF and gambogic amide selectively triggered TrkA Y490 phosphorylation in neurons. (C) K252a decreases gambogic amide-triggered TrkA tyrosine phosphorylation. (D) Gambogic amide provokes TrkA dimerization. GFP-TrkA and HA-TrkA or HA-TrkB were, respectively, cotransfected into HEK293 cells and treated with 0.5 μM GA or gambogic amide for 30 min. GFP-TrkA was immunoprecipitated with anti-GFP antibody, and the coprecipitated proteins were analyzed with anti-HA antibody. Gambogic amide, but not GA, evidently stimulated TrkA dimerization. The stimulatory effect was even stronger than NGF. (Upper) By contrast, TrkA did not bind to TrkB regardless of NGF or gambogic amide treatment. (E) Gambogic amide triggered TrkA, but not TrkB or TrkC, tyrosine phosphorylation in transfected HEK293 cells. Kinase-dead TrkA displayed negligible tyrosine phosphorylation. (F) In vitro binding assay with GST-Trk recombinant proteins. Gambogic amide, but not other GA derivatives, selectively binds TrkA, but not TrkB or TrkC. (G) GA derivatives are unable to trigger both PI3-kinase and MAPK signaling activation in TrkB-stable cells. The experiments and immunoblotting gels in this study were repeated more than three times. 

Right). Taken together, these observations support the hypothesis that gambogic amide mimics NGF and potently activates Akt and MAPK activation in neurons.

One of most prominent neurotrophic effects of NGF is to trigger neurite outgrowth in neuronal cells and incur differentiation. To explore whether GA compounds possess this activity, we incubated PC12 cells with 0.5 μM compounds for 5 days. The cell medium containing the compounds was replenished every other day. As expected, NGF elicited pronounced neurite sprouting in PC12 cells after 5 days of treatment. Both gambogic amide and dihydro-GA induced evident neurite outgrowth in PC12 cells, whereas GA and dimethyl GA failed. The neurite network generated by gambogic amide was much more demonstrable than that generated by dihydro-GA, suggesting that gambogic amide might possess stronger neurotrophic activity than the latter (Fig. 4D). A dose-dependent assay revealed that 10–50 nM gambogic amide was sufficient to provoke substantial neurite sprouting in PC12 cells (Fig. 4E). This effect can be blocked by 30 nM K252a (Fig. 4F), indicating that gambogic amide-induced neurite outgrowth is TrkA-dependent. Thus, gambogic amide possesses potent neurotrophic activity at a concentration comparable to NGF and robustly provokes neurite outgrowth.

Gambogic Amide Prevents Neuronal Apoptosis and Decreases Infarct Volume. Kainic acid (KA) is a potent agonist for the AMPA receptor. Peripheral injections of KA result in recurrent seizures...
and the subsequent degeneration of select populations of neurons in the hippocampus (31–33). KA induces neuronal cell death in caspase-dependent and caspase-independent manners (34, 35). To explore whether gambogenic amide can block the neurotoxicity initiated by KA, we s.c. injected 2 mg/kg gambogenic amide into C57BL/6 mice, followed by 25 mg/kg KA. In 5 days, the mice were perfused, and the brains were cut to a thickness of 5 μm and mounted onto slides. TUNEL staining revealed that KA provoked enormous apoptosis in the hippocampus, and this finding was substantially diminished by gambogenic amide (Fig. 5A Upper). Quantitative analysis of apoptosis in the hippocampus revealed that KA induced 47% and 57% cell death in the CA1 and CA3 regions, respectively, whereas gambogenic amide strongly decreased apoptosis to 6.3% and 1.8% in these two regions, respectively (Fig. 5A Lower Left). Interestingly, we also found that the TrkA expression level was substantially increased after KA administration (Fig. 5A Lower Right), which fits with previous reports that TrkA is up-regulated in hippocampal and cortical neurons under pathophysiological conditions (25, 26).

To further determine the neuroprotective potential in vivo, gambogenic amide was tested in a transient MCAO stroke model in adult male rats. After 2 h of MCAO followed by reperfusion, the animals received vehicle or 2 mg/kg gambogenic amide 5 min before the onset of reperfusion. All animals included in the study survived the ischemic insult and treatment with gambogenic amide. A representative brain slice stained with tetanus toxin 24 h after MCAO in vehicle- and gambogenic amide-treated rats is shown (Fig. 5B Left).

Area and volume measurements from tetanus toxin-stained sections indicated that GA treatments substantially reduced infarct volumes in this transient ischemic model of stroke (Fig. 5B Right). These results concur with a previous report that NGF reduces infarct volume and apoptosis in focal ischemia (28). Laser-Doppler flowmetry was measured over the ipsilateral parietal cortex. Relative cerebral blood flow was reduced to 24.41% (±3.78%) and 25.09% (±5.73%) within 5 min of MCAO in rats that subsequently received GA or vehicle treatment. After 120-min filament withdrawal, relative cerebral blood flow increased to 85.83% (±4.94%) in the GA-treated group and to 87.81% (±2.23%) in the vehicle-treated group compared with preischemic levels. There were no significant differences between groups, suggesting that the relative ischemic insult was equivalent among all groups. The TrkA expression level was increased after ischemia (data not shown). Taken together, gambogenic amide is a potent TrkA agonist, prevents neuronal cell death, and protects the neurodegeneration elicited by excitatory neurotoxicity and stroke.

Discussion

In the present study, we demonstrate that gambogenic amide mimics NGF and acts as a robust TrkA agonist. However, gambogenic amide and NGF bind to different regions on TrkA. NGF is a homodimeric polypeptide, which associates with the Ig-like domain (TrkA-d5 domain) proximal to the membrane, whereas gambogenic amide robustly binds the cytoplasmic justmembrane region. NGF triggers TrkA activation through promoting its dimerization and autophosphorylation. Gambogenic amide, but not GA, also stimulates TrkA’s dimerization and tyrosine phosphorylation (Fig. 1). It remains unknown exactly how gambogenic amide provokes TrkA dimerization and autophosphorylation. Conceivably, it provokes TrkA conformational change and reduces the autoinhibitory effect by the Ig2 domain, which can block TrkA dimerization in the absence of NGF (36). It is worth noting that gambogenic amide provokes TrkA tyrosine phosphorylation, which can be blocked by K252a (Fig. 3), suggesting that Y490 and Y751 phosphorylation is TrkA-dependent. Interestingly, gambogenic amide, but not GA, possesses evident neurotrophic activities. For example, gambogenic amide strongly stimulates both Akt and MAPK activation and triggers TrkA tyrosine phosphorylation in hippocampal neurons. In contrast, GA can elicit only Akt, but not MAPK, activation and fails to induce TrkA tyrosine phosphorylation (Figs. 3 and 4). These results are consistent with the observation that gambogenic amide, but not gambogenic GA, enhances TrkA dimerization (Fig. 1). However, it is unclear how GA protects hippocampal neurons from apoptosis (Fig. 2). Presumably, this effect results from its potent effect on Akt activation (Fig. 4A).

The structure-activity study with T17 cells and hippocampal neurons reveals that the carbonyl group can tolerate different modifications, suggesting that the carbonyl side chain might not be critical for binding to its biological targets. Therefore, the carbonyl group can be used to prepare compounds to optimize the apoptosis-inhibitory efficacy. Reduction of the unsaturated prenyl side chains or C9–C10 α,β-unsaturated ketone and C12 ketone (Fig. 2A) completely abolishes the protective effect. On the contrary, it even triggers substantial apoptosis in hippocampal neurons. These results demonstrate that the spatial structure of prenyl side chains and unsaturated double bonds in the caged polyene rings are essential for its neurotrophic effects. Notably, some of the GA derivatives exhibit robust antiapoptotic activity in T17, but not in...
hippocampal neurons. This effect is probably due to TrkA overexpression in T17 cells because T17 cells display much stronger antiapoptotic effects compared with their parental SN56 cells even in the absence of any drugs (Fig. 2B). GA has been used in traditional Chinese medicine to treat cancers. It potently blocks human cancer proliferation in vitro and in animals (17, 18). Recently, it has been shown that the transferrin receptor functions as a cellular target for GA to exert its anticancer activity. Presumably, gambogenic amide, the most potent TrkA agonist we identified, might bind transferrin receptor as well as TrkA. GA associates with transferrin with a Kd of 2.2 μM (20). Conceivably, gambogenic amide binds to the TrkA receptor much more specifically and tightly than to the transferrin receptor. Consequently, it might exert neurotrophic activity more robustly and selectively than apoptotic GA. This could be useful for the treatment of neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer’s disease and stroke (28, 29). Thus, our finding that gambogenic amide is a TrkA agonist that prevents neuronal cell death may be clinically important for the treatment of various neurodegenerative diseases and stroke.

Materials and Methods

Cells and Reagents. Mouse septal neuron × neuroblastoma hybrids SN56 cells were created by fusing N18TG2 neuroblastoma cells with murine (strain C57BL/6) neurons from postnatal day 21. SN56 cells were maintained at 37°C with 5% CO2 atmosphere in DMEM containing 1 mM pyruvate and 10% FBS. T17 cells stably transfected with rat TrkA were cultured in the same medium containing 300 μg/ml G418. The cells were gifts from Brygida Berse (Boston University, Boston, MA). NGF was purchased from Roche Diagnostics (Indianapolis, IN). Phospho-Akt-473 or -308, Akt, and lamin A/C antibodies were from Cell Signaling Technology (Danvers, MA). Anti-phospho-ERK1/2, anti-phospho-TrkA Y490, anti-phospho-TrkA Y751, and anti-phospho-Akt 473 antibodies were from Upstate Biotechnology (Lake Placid, NY). The chemical library containing 2,000 biologically active compounds was from the Spectrum Collection (Microsource Discovery System, Gaylordsville, CT). All chemicals not included herein were purchased from Sigma–Aldrich (St. Louis, MO).

Cell-based Screen. T17 cells were seeded in a 96-well plate at 10,000 cells per well in 100 μl of complete medium. Cells were incubated overnight, followed by 30-min pretreatment with 10 μM compounds in DMSO (10 mM stock concentration from the Spectrum Collection Library). The cells were then treated with 1 μM staurosporine for 9 h. One hour before the termination of the experiment, 10 μM MR(DVED)2, a cell-permeant, caspase-3-activated fluorescent dye, was introduced. Cells were fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde for 15 min. Cells were washed with PBS and incubated with 1 μg/ml Hoechst 33342 for 10 min. Coverslides were washed with PBS, mounted, and examined using a fluorescence microscope (see SI Text).

Imagization of GA and Synthesis of FITC-GA. GA was immobilized to Affi-Gel 102 (Bio-Rad, Hercules, CA), which contains a free amine group, by using N’-(3-dimethylaminopropyl)-N-ethylcarbodiimide (EDC) and N-hydroxysuccinimide (NHS). The amiation reaction was carried out at room temperature. In brief, a mixture of 6.28 mg of reduced GA (10 μmol), 1.1 mg of NHS (5 μmol), 0.4 mg of EDC (2 μmol), and 1 ml of Affi-Gel 102 in ethanol was stirred at room temperature for 5 h. The reaction mixture was washed three times with a large volume of 100% ethanol. The GA conjugated beads were kept in 1× PBS at 4°C in the dark. For synthesizing FITC conjugated GA, GA was activated with EDC and NHS in ethanol. The reaction mixture was introduced into 1 ml of FITC (3.89 mg, 10 μmol) in ethanol. After a 2-h incubation at room temperature, the reaction solution was poured into 10 ml of water and extracted with 3× 10 ml of ethyl acetate. The combined organic layer was dried and concentrated to yield the crude product, which was purified by chromatography (SiO2 ethyl acetate/hexane) to yield the desired compounds.

Neurite Outgrowth Assay. In a typical neurite-induction experiment, PC12 cells were seeded in the growth medium at 1 × 104 cells per well in poly(L-lysine)-coated 12-well culture plates (BD Biosciences, San Jose, CA), allowed to grow for 24 h, and supplemented with each of the various drugs or NGF. After 5 days, neurite outgrowth was measured as the distance between the cell periphery and the tip of neurite, and neuritic processes longer than two cell bodies in length were calculated as neurites. Unless otherwise mentioned, results were represented as the three independent experiments.

Statistical Analysis. All results were expressed as mean ± SD. Mean ischemic laser-doppler flowmetry and lesion volume were analyzed using Student’s t test. The criterion for statistical significance was set at P < 0.05.

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