RESEARCH NOTE

Effect of LXR/RXR agonism on brain and CSF Aβ40 levels in rats [version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

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Abstract
Alzheimer’s disease (AD) is characterized pathologically by the presence of amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles. The amyloid hypothesis contends that the abnormal accumulation of Aβ, the principal component of amyloid plaques, plays an essential role in initiating the disease. Impaired clearance of soluble Aβ from the brain, a process facilitated by apolipoprotein E (APOE), is believed to be a contributing factor in plaque formation. APOE expression is transcriptionally regulated through the action of a family of nuclear receptors including the peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma and liver X receptors (LXRs) in coordination with retinoid X receptors (RXRs). It has been previously reported that various agonists of this receptor family can influence brain Aβ levels in rodents. In this study we investigated the effects of LXR/RXR agonism on brain and cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) levels of Aβ40 in naïve rats. Treatment of rats for 3 days or 7 days with the LXR agonist, TO901317 or the RXR agonist, Bexarotene did not result in significant changes in brain or CSF Aβ40 levels.

Keywords
Alzheimer’s, Apolipoprotein E, Aβ, liver X receptor, retinoid X receptor, Bexarotene

This article is included in the Preclinical Reproducibility and Robustness gateway.
Introduction
Alzheimer’s disease (AD) is a debilitating neurodegenerative disease and the leading cause of dementia in the elderly. It is currently estimated that 5 million people in the US and 30 million worldwide are afflicted with this disease. The pathological hallmarks of AD are the presence of extracellular amyloid plaques and intracellular neurofibrillary tangles in the hippocampus and cortical areas of the brain. The core constituent of the amyloid plaques is a 4 kDa peptide known as amyloid-β peptide (Aβ). Aggregation of Aβ into soluble, multimeric assemblies and insoluble amyloid fibrils is hypothesized to contribute directly to the pathogenesis of AD; therefore therapeutic strategies aimed at lowering soluble Aβ levels in the brain would be predicted to have a disease-modifying effect.

The E4 allele of apolipoprotein E (APOE) is the largest genetic risk factor for sporadic, late-onset AD. The presence of a single copy of E4 increases the risk for Alzheimer’s disease 3-fold and individuals with 2 copies are 15 times more likely to develop AD. Data showing that APOE4 carriers begin to accumulate amyloid deposits earlier in life relative to non-carriers has led to the hypothesis that increased risk associated with an E4 genotype may be the result of the effects of APOE on Aβ production, turnover and/or clearance from the central nervous system (CNS).

The expression of genes encoding lipid-transport proteins, including APOE is transcriptionally regulated by the ligand-activated nuclear receptors, peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor gamma (PPARγ) and liver X receptors (LXRs) which form obligate heterodimers with retinoid X receptors (RXRs). Additionally, activation of these receptors has been shown to affect the activation state of macrophage and microglia. Based on the processes influenced by this nuclear receptor family it is a reasonable hypothesis that agonism of one or more members of the family could have beneficial effects on Aβ homeostasis in the CNS. In fact, several groups have demonstrated that agonism of the LXR receptor resulted in reduced amyloid plaque burden and/or soluble Aβ levels in amyloid precursor protein (APP) transgenic mouse models. More recently it was reported that a highly selective, blood-brain barrier–permeant, RXR agonist, Bexarotene (Targretin), resulted in enhanced clearance of soluble Aβ in an APP transgenic mouse model in an APOE-dependent manner. In addition, Aβ plaque burden was reduced more than 50% within 72 hours. Further, Bexarotene treatment also resulted in a similar reduction (~25%) in brain interstitial fluid (ISF) levels of Aβ in non-transgenic, C57Bl/6 mice 7–12 hours following a single administration.

In the following study, we sought to examine the effects of LXR/RXR agonism on Aβ homeostasis in the CNS of non-transgenic rats using the RXR agonist, Bexarotene and the LXR agonist, TO901317.

Materials and methods
*In vivo pharmacodynamic studies*: All procedures were approved by the Amgen Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee. Young male Sprague-Dawley rats (175–200 g) were purchased from Harlan (Indianapolis, IN) and were maintained on a 12 h light/dark cycle with unrestricted access to food and water until use. Rats were dosed orally for 3 and 7 consecutive days with AMG8155, a proprietary small molecule BACE1 inhibitor, at 3 mg/kg in 2% HPMC and 1% Tween 80, pH 2, Bexarotene (Alfa Aesar, Ward Hill, MA) at 100 mg/kg in 30% Labrasol, 1% Tween 20, 2% Providone and 0.05% BHA, pH7.0 (Vehicle 3), and TO901317, a LXR agonist (Fisher Scientific, Pittsburgh, PA), at 30 mg/kg in 0.5% NaCl, 2% Tween 80 (Vehicle 4). 4 hours post dose on the last day of study, rats were euthanized with CO2 inhalation for 2 minutes and the cisterna magna was quickly exposed by removing the skin and muscle above it. Cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) was collected with a 30 gauge needle inserted through the dura membrane covering the cisterna magna. CSF samples with visible blood contamination were discarded. Blood was withdrawn by cardiac puncture and plasma was obtained by centrifugation at 15,000 rpm for 10 min at 4°C for drug exposure. Brains were removed and, along with the CSF, immediately frozen on dry ice and stored at -80°C until use. The frozen brains were subsequently homogenized in 10 volumes (w/v) of 0.5% Triton X-100 in TBS with protease inhibitors cocktails. The homogenates were centrifuged at 355,000 rpm for 30 min at 4°C.

**Quantification of Aβ40 and APOE in brain and CSF**: Samples are analyzed for Aβ levels by immunoadsorb with a MSD imager. Briefly, 96-well avidin plates (MesoScale Discovery, Inc., Gaithersburg, MD) were coated with biotinylated-anti-Aβ antibody 4G8 (mouse monoclonal, Cat# Sig 39240-1000, Covance Research Products, Princeton, NJ) at 10 μg/ml in PBS. Samples were co-incubated in the plate overnight at 4°C along with a ruthenium-labeled anti-Aβ antibody specific for the C-terminal region of Aβ40 (ConFab40; Amgen, Thousand Oaks, CA). Plates were then washed, 150 μl/well read buffer T (MesoScale Discovery, Inc.) was added, and plates were read immediately on a Sector 6000 imager according to the manufacturer’s recommended protocol (MesoScale Discovery, Inc.). All samples were assayed in triplicate and analyzed by using Prism version 5.04 (GraphPad Software Inc., San Diego, CA). Data was analyzed by one-way analysis of variance and Dunnett’s multiple comparison test.

APOE levels in brain (50 μg homogenates) and CSF (10 μl) were analyzed by Western blot following PAGE using 4–12% Bis-Tris gels (Invitrogen, Carlsbad, CA). Blots were probed with primary antibodies to APOE (goat polyclonal, EMD Millipore; 1:1000) and the loading control, actin (ThermoFisher Scientific; 1:200) for 60 min at 4°C and then washed with TBST (Tris-buffered saline, 0.1% Tween 20) three times at room temperature, followed by (Goat-anti-mouse) secondary antibody (ThermoFisher Scientific; 1:1000) for 30 min at 4°C. Densitometric analysis of ApoE was performed (exposure time of 4 minutes with a relative intensity of 2.0, Odyssey imaging system, with application software Version 3.0) followed by an unpaired t test using GraphPad Prism 5.04 software.

**Measurement of Plasma, CSF, and Brain Drug Concentration**: Aliquots of plasma (50 μl) were combined with 300 μl of acetonitrile containing 125 μl structurally related internal standard (IS), vortexed, and centrifuged. Supernatant was transferred into a plain polypropylene 96-well plate for sample analysis. Brain tissue samples were homogenized by using a Covaris (Woburn, MA) acoustic homogenizer. Aliquots of 50 μl homogenate were combined with acetonitrile containing a structurally related IS, vortexed, and centrifuged at 1,900 g for 5 minutes. Supernatant was transferred into a 96-well plate for sample analysis. Analytical standards and tissues were measured by liquid chromatography mass spectrometry (Shimadzu Pumps Autosampler Prominance for HPLC and PE SCIEX API 4000 for MS, with Analyst 1.6.1 software) using...
Results
Our aim in this study was to investigate the effects of RXR/LXR agonism on Aβ homeostasis in the CNS of non-transgenic rats using the RXR agonist, Bexarotene and the LXR agonist, TO901317. As a positive control, we included a β-secretase inhibitor (AMG8155). Compounds and appropriate vehicle controls were administered to naïve Sprague Dawley rats at doses indicated in Table 1 for either 3 or 7 consecutive days.

Following 3 and 7 days of dosing, animals were evaluated for both compound levels and pharmacodynamic endpoints. APOE levels were quantitated in brain homogenate and CSF by Western blot. Aβ40 levels were quantitated in the same compartments using immunoassay as described in the Materials and methods section. Following 3 and 7 days of dosing, APOE levels were increased in brain and CSF in the TO901317 treated animals compared to vehicle treated animals (Figure 1). Changes in CSF were statistically

Table 1. Dosing Table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Dose (mg/kg)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bexarotene</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMG8155</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO901317</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 lists the 3 compounds tested in this study along with the respective doses (mg/kg).

Figure 1. LXR agonist, TO901317 significantly increased APOE levels in rat CSF following 3 and 7 days of dosing at 30 mg/kg. APOE was also increased in brain however the changes only reached statistical significance at day 3. A) Western blot analysis of APOE in brain and CSF. B) Densitometric analysis of the bands was performed as described in the Materials and Methods section; data are presented as the mean plus standard deviation; Vehicle 4 (black bars) and TO901317 (gray bars).
significant at both 3 (p = 0.0002) and 7 days (p = 0.0007) whereas changes in brain were statistically significant at day 3 (p = 0.030) but did not reach significance at day 7 (p = 0.056). Bexarotene treatment also resulted in a statistically significant increase in CSF APOE levels compared to vehicle treated animals following both 3 (p = 0.019) and 7 days (p = 0.002) of dosing (Figure 2). APOE levels in brain following Bexarotene treatment trended towards an increase however these changes were not statistically significant. Soluble Aβ40 levels were unchanged in brain and CSF following 3-day (Figure 3) and 7-day (Figure 4) treatment with either Bexarotene or TO901317. The positive control BACE inhibitor, AMG8155 effectively reduced Aβ40 levels by 70% and 71% in CSF and by 67% and 69% in brain in the 3-day and 7-day studies respectively (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

Drug levels of Bexarotene and TO901317 were measured in plasma and brain homogenate following 3 and 7 days of dosing (Table 2). Total levels of both compounds achieved single-digit to low double-digit μM levels in brain and showed good uptake in brain relative to plasma in both dosing paradigms.

![Figure 2. RXR agonist, Bexarotene significantly increased APOE in rat CSF following 3 and 7 days of dosing at 100 mg/kg. APOE changes in brain were not statistically significant. A) Western blot analysis of APOE in brain and CSF. B) Densitometric analysis of the bands was performed as described in the Materials and Methods section; data are presented as the mean plus standard deviation; Vehicle 4 (black bars) and Bexarotene (gray bars).](image-url)
Figure 3. Aβ40 levels in (A) CSF and (B) brain were unchanged following 3 days of treatment with Bexarotene (triangles) or TO901317 (diamonds). Positive control BACE inhibitor AMG8155 (squares) reduced Aβ40 levels 70 and 67% in CSF and brain respectively following a single administration.

Figure 4. Aβ40 levels in (A) CSF and (B) brain were unchanged following 7 days of treatment with Bexarotene (triangles) or TO901317 (diamonds). Positive control BACE inhibitor AMG8155 (squares) reduced Aβ40 levels 71 and 69% in CSF and brain respectively following a single administration.
**Table 2. Compound Exposure Table.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment Duration</th>
<th>Compound</th>
<th>[brain], μM</th>
<th>[plasma], μM</th>
<th>[brain]/[plasma]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 days</td>
<td>Bexarotene (100 mg/kg)</td>
<td>6.26</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TO901317 (30 mg/kg)</td>
<td>14.44</td>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 days</td>
<td>Bexarotene (100 mg/kg)</td>
<td>3.41</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TO901317 (30 mg/kg)</td>
<td>11.68</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>2.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following 3 and 7 days of dosing, compound levels were measured in brain homogenate and plasma. Total (t) compound concentrations (μM) are reported in each case. The brain to plasma ratio is also shown (far right-hand column).

**Conclusion**

In this study we demonstrate that 3-day or 7-day treatment of naïve rats with the LXR agonist, TO901317 or RXR agonist, Bexarotene treatment resulted in an increase in APOE levels in CSF. No changes were observed in CSF or brain Aβ40 levels with either compound after 3 or 7 days of dosing. We hope that these findings will stimulate further discussion in the Alzheimer’s research community on the impact of LXR/RXR agonism on central Aβ homeostasis.

**Data availability**

Open Science Framework: Dataset: Effect of LXR/RXR agonism on brain and CSF Aβ40 levels in rats, doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/3NS64

**Author contributions**

S. Wang: Participated in research design; wrote or contributed to the writing of the manuscript.

P. Wen: Participated in research design; conducted experiments; performed data analysis; wrote or contributed to the writing of the manuscript.

S. Wood: Participated in research design; performed data analysis; wrote or contributed to the writing of the manuscript.

**Competing interests**

All authors are employees and stockholders of Amgen, Inc.

**Grant information**

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**References**

In this manuscript, Wang and colleagues report that treatment for 3 and 7 d bexarotene (Bex, an RXR agonist) or T0901317 (TO, an LXR agonist) induce an increase in apoE levels and but have no effect on Aβ40 in the CSF and brain of rats. While the subject matter is timely, the conclusions must be taken with reservations because of three major concerns:

1. Limited readouts and regions analyzed. It has been previously demonstrated that changes in the levels of Aβ40 and apoE in CSF and brain do not always correlate with efficacy in FAD-Tg mice\(^1,2\). Furthermore, it has been shown that an increase of apoE levels by Bex can be beneficial or detrimental depending on the isoform of apoE\(^3\) or the brain region analyzed\(^3\).

2. The exclusion of Aβ42. It has been reported that CSF Aβ42 levels, and not Aβ40, are increased in AD patients compared to controls\(^4\).

3. Comparison to previous reports. Suon and colleagues (2010)\(^5\) treated rats with LXR agonists TO (at the same dose) or GW3965 and reported an increase in apoE that correlated with an increase in Ab40/42 levels in CSF and a reduction of Aβ40 in brain\(^5\). Wang and colleagues should reconcile their results with this work specifically and interpret their work in the context of the field in general.

A minor observation is that in Figure 1A the vehicle is mislabeled as Vehicle 3 (should be Vehicle 4 for TO901317)

Within the AD field, there is an ongoing discussion of the effects of Bex on soluble and deposited Aβ levels in the brain and cognition, with contradictory findings. This is likely due to several confounding factors, including: variance within and across models and inconsistencies in the methods used to characterize and quantify the proteins of interest, particularly soluble Aβ. It is imperative to take these parameters into account when considering the efficacy of RXR or LXR agonists for AD therapeutics. As well, a phase I trial of Bex in AD patients recently concluded\(^6\). While these results may be of limited significance and were not available for the submission of this manuscript, inclusion of their results in a revision of the Discussion would be helpful.

References
Abstract I Publisher Full Text


Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

We have read this submission. We believe that we have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however we have significant reservations, as outlined above.

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Some controversy has surrounded the report in Science from Landreth and colleagues showing that bexarotene reduces the brain amyloid plaque burden from APP transgenic mice by 50% or more in a matter of days. Several groups of experts attempted to replicate the dramatic Landreth results but the dramatic results were not replicatable. The current F1000Research paper extends that replication attempt story by treating rats with bexarotene and then measuring APP metabolites and apoE in CSF. In agreement with the "second wave" of bexarotene studies, there was no effect of bexarotene on CSF levels of Aβ40 or Aβ42. The one point of agreement of all studies was that bexarotene does indeed modulation CSF levels of apoE. This argues against the development of bexarotene mimetics as Aβ lowering agents for the treatment or prevention of Alzheimer's disease. However, inasmuch as elevating apoE may be beneficial in clinical situations via a non-Aβ-dependent pathway (see http://www.alzforum.org/news/research-news/bexarotene-revisited-improves-mouse-memory-no-effect-pl), bexarotene does reproducibly modulate CSF levels of apoE. The discovery of the entity of SNAP (for review, see Jack et al., 2016) indicates that about one-third of clinically diagnosed Alzheimer's patients undergo cognitive decline via some as yet unknown non-Aβ-dependent pathway.

References
**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

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