

UFP-101, a Peptide Antagonist Selective for the Nociceptin/Orphanin FQ Receptor

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ABSTRACT

Nociceptin/orphanin FQ modulates various biological functions at central and peripheral levels by selectively activating a G-protein coupled receptor named N/OFQ peptide (NOP) receptor. For extending our knowledge on the biological roles of the N/OFQ – NOP receptor system the identification of selective NOP ligands, especially antagonists, is mandatory. [Nphe¹, Arg¹⁴, Lys¹⁵] N/OFQ-NH₂ (UFP-101) is a novel NOP ligand that was designed by combining, in the same molecule, the [Nphe¹] chemical modification which eliminates efficacy and the [Arg¹⁴, Lys¹⁵] substitution which increases ligand potency and duration of action *in vivo*. In the present article, we summarize the pharmacological features of UFP-101 as determined in a series of *in vitro* and *in vivo* assays. Moreover, some biological actions and possible therapeutic indications of NOP ligands are discussed on the basis of results obtained with UFP-101. Data obtained with this compound were compared with those generated using other NOP antagonists, especially J-113397 and [Nphe¹]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂, receptor or peptide knockout mice and other pharmacological tools useful for blocking N/OFQ – NOP receptor signaling.

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The analysis of the available data demonstrates that UFP-101 is a useful pharmacological tool for the investigation of the central and peripheral biological functions regulated by the N/OFQ – NOP receptor system and for defining the therapeutic potential of NOP receptor ligands

INTRODUCTION

Drugs interacting with G-protein coupled receptors (GPCRs) have a variety of therapeutic indications from pain to hypertension, respiratory and gastrointestinal diseases, neurological and psychiatric pathologies, and control of food intake, making this class of membrane receptors the most important biological target for drug discovery (94). This may remain true in the future as at least 360 different genes coding for putative GPCRs (excluding sensory GPCRs) have been identified in the human genome yet the natural ligand is known only for approximately 210 receptors, the others being still orphan (94). Novel drugs acting at orphan GPCRs are likely to provide innovative treatments for a variety of pathological conditions and diseases (57,93,94). The first step in understanding the function and the potential of an orphan GPCR as drug target is the identification of its endogenous ligand (58). This process, defined as reverse pharmacology (20), has already led to the pairing of several previously orphan GPCRs with their endogenous ligands: in this way, several novel ligand-receptor systems have been recognized. These appear to be important in the regulation of a range of various biological functions including sleep, pain transmission, cardiovascular homeostasis, airways physiology, and inflammatory processes (21,44,57).

Nociceptin/orphanin FQ (N/OFQ) and its N/OFQ peptide receptor (NOP) represent the first successful example of the reverse pharmacology approach (20). The cloning of classical opioid receptors in the early 90s (14,29,46,97) led several groups to the simultaneous identification of an opioid-like receptor in 1994 which did not bind opioid ligands (66). A heptadecapeptide was identified as the natural ligand for the opioid-like receptor at the end of 1995 and was named nociceptin (67) or orphanin FQ (80). This novel peptide/receptor system is now considered “a non-opioid branch of the opioid family” of peptides and receptors (22); this definition is based from one side on close structural and transductional similarities and from the other on the pharmacological and functional differences between the N/OFQ – NOP receptor and the classical opioid systems (9,68).

The genes coding for the N/OFQ precursor (ppN/OFQ) and the NOP receptor proteins are now cloned in various species. The structural organization of ppN/OFQ is similar to opioid peptide precursors, supporting the view of a common origin for the opioid systems and the N/OFQ-NOP receptor system (69,75). In addition to N/OFQ, the precursor may encode two other biologically active peptides, named nocistatin (77) and N/OFQ2 (87), which do not bind the NOP receptor. Anatomic studies have revealed high levels of expression of the N/OFQ messenger RNA in brain structures involved in sensory, emotional and cognitive processing (81). NOP receptors are located both pre- and post-synaptically in various areas of the central nervous system, in particular in the forebrain (cortical areas, olfactory regions, limbic structures, thalamus), throughout the brainstem (central periaqueductal gray, substantia nigra, several sensory and motor nuclei), and in both the dorsal and ventral horns of the spinal cord (70). NOP mRNA and binding sites exhibit approxi-

mately the same distribution pattern, indicating that the NOP receptor is mainly located on local neuronal circuits. The NOP receptor is also expressed in the peripheral nervous system (70). The diffuse distribution of NOP mRNA and binding in the central nervous system supports an extensive role for N/OFQ in a multitude of functions. Indeed, animal studies demonstrated that N/OFQ, via NOP receptor activation, modulates several biological functions including pain transmission, stress and anxiety, learning and memory, locomotor activity, food intake, and the motivational properties of drugs of abuse. N/OFQ may also intervene in the regulation of the functions of peripheral systems such as the cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, renal, genitourinary and respiratory (9,68). It is worthy of mention that the inhibitory effect of N/OFQ on the micturition reflex, well documented in rodents (56), has been recently confirmed in patients with neurogenic bladder (54,55).

Understanding of the biological roles played by the N/OFQ-NOP receptor system is, to a major extent, dependent upon the identification of highly potent and NOP selective ligands, especially antagonists. Currently available ligands for the NOP receptor have been recently reviewed (99). They can be divided into three groups based on their chemical nature: i) small molecules discovered via high throughput screening within pharmaceutical industry, e.g., the NOP selective antagonists J-113397 (1-[(3R,4R)-1-cyclooctylmethyl-3-hydroxymethyl-4-piperidyl]-3-ethyl-1,3-dihydro-benzimidazol-2-one, (78)) and SB-612111 {(-)-cis-1-methyl-7-[[4-(2,6-dichlorophenyl) piperidin-1-yl]methyl]-6,7,8,9-tetrahydro-5H-benzocyclohepten-5-ol, (98)}, or the selective agonist Ro 64-6198 {[(1S,3aS)-8-(2,3,3a,4,5,6-hexahydro-1H-phenalen-1-yl)-1-phenyl-1,3,8-triaza-spiro[4.5]decan-4-one], (40)}; ii) short peptides identified by screening of synthetic peptide combinatorial libraries, e.g., the NOP selective partial agonists Ac-RYYRWK-NH₂ and Ac-RYYRIK-NH₂ (28) or the non-selective NOP antagonist peptide III-BTD (2); and iii) N/OFQ related peptides identified by classical structure-activity relationship studies. Our research group contributed in this latter area with the identification and pharmacological characterization of the following NOP ligands: the full agonists N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ and N/OFQ-NH₂ (5,33), the partial agonist [Phe¹Ψ(CH₂-NH)Gly²]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ (6,34), and the pure antagonist [Nphe¹]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ (8,35). More recently, two highly potent NOP agonists were identified by addition of a fluorine atom at the para position of Phe⁴, generating [(pF)Phe⁴]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ (4,36,83), or through introduction in position 14 and 15 an extra couple of basic residues Arg, Lys generating [Arg¹⁴, Lys¹⁵]N/OFQ (76,86). We combined in the N/OFQ-NH₂ sequence the chemical modifications which reduce ([Phe¹Ψ(CH₂-NH)Gly²]) or eliminate ([Nphe¹]) agonist efficacy with those which increase agonist potency ([(pF)Phe⁴] and [Arg¹⁴Lys¹⁵]) thus generating a novel series of NOP ligands (37). Among these, the most interesting molecules were the pure antagonist [Nphe¹, Arg¹⁴, Lys¹⁵]N/OFQ-NH₂ (UFP-101), the full agonist [(pF)Phe⁴, Arg¹⁴, Lys¹⁵]N/OFQ-NH₂ [UFP-102, (12)] and the partial agonist [Phe¹Ψ(CH₂-NH)Gly², (pF)Phe⁴, Arg¹⁴, Lys¹⁵]N/OFQ-NH₂.

In the present article, we summarized the pharmacological features of UFP-101 as determined in a series of *in vitro* and *in vivo* assays. Moreover, some biological actions and possible therapeutic indications of NOP ligands are discussed on the basis of results obtained with UFP-101 and i) other NOP antagonists, especially J-113397 and [Nphe¹]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂; ii) results obtained in knockout animals (NOP receptor (NOP^{-/-}, (73)) and ppN/OFQ (ppN/OFQ^{-/-} (48) mice), iii) other pharmacological tools

useful for blocking N/OFQ – NOP receptor signaling such as oligo antisense or antibodies targeting the peptide or the receptor.

PHARMACOLOGY

Basic Pharmacological Profile of UFP-101

The cellular actions induced by N/OFQ via NOP receptor activation are similar (if not superimposable) to those elicited by classical opioids. In fact, in different cell types, NOP receptor activation inhibited adenylyl cyclase and Ca^{2+} channels while activating K^+ channels via pertussis toxin-sensitive G-proteins (39). This indicates that NOP receptors couple to the $\text{G}_{i/o}$ class of G-proteins. Via these cellular actions, NOP receptors located on neurons produced robust inhibitory effects either by reducing neurotransmitter release (presynaptic localization) or cellular excitability (postsynaptic localization). Thus, the ability of N/OFQ to promote $\text{GTP}\gamma[^{35}\text{S}]$ binding and to inhibit forskolin stimulated cAMP accumulation in cell cultures, to reduce neurogenic contractions in isolated tissues, and to inhibit neurotransmitter release and stimulate K^+ conductance in various brain preparations, was used for developing a rather large series of *in vitro* pharmacological preparations suitable for investigating novel NOP ligands with different biochemical, bioassay, neurochemical and electrophysiological approaches. UFP-101 data obtained by different laboratories with such approaches are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1. In vitro pharmacological profile of UFP-101

Preparation	N/OFQ action	pEC ₅₀	UFP-101 action	pA ₂	References
CHOhNOP	↑ $\text{GTP}\gamma[^{35}\text{S}]$	8.7	comp antagonism	9.1	(11)
CHOhNOP	↓ cAMP	11.0	comp antagonism	7.1	(11)
CHOhNOP	↑ NOP internalization	ND	antagonism	—	(27)
Vas deferens (m)	↓ contractions	7.7	comp antagonism	7.3	(11)
Vas deferens (r)	↓ contractions	7.2	comp antagonism	7.3	(11)
Ileum (gp)	↓ contractions	8.1	comp antagonism	7.2	(11)
Bronchus (h)	↓ contractions	~7	antagonism	ND	(1)
Monocytes (h)	↑ chemotaxis	~12	comp antagonism	7.0	(92)
CC synaptosomes (r)	↓ 5-HT release	7.5	comp antagonism	7.7	(11)
CC synaptosomes (r)	↓ NE release	7.7	antagonism	ND	(61)
CC synaptosomes (m)	↓ 5-HT release	8.6	antagonism	ND	(65)
Locus coeruleus slices (r)	↑ K^+ current	ND	antagonism	ND	(31)
Dorsal raphe slices (r)	↑ K^+ current	ND	antagonism	ND	(31)
Periaqueductal gray slices (r)	↑ K^+ current	7.3	antagonism	ND	(16)
Substantia nigra slices (r)	↓ DA neuron firing	ND	antagonism	ND	(63)

Abbreviations: h, human; m, mouse; r, rat; gp, guinea pig; CC, cerebrocortical; 5-HT, serotonin; NE, norepinephrine; DA, dopamine; comp, competitive.

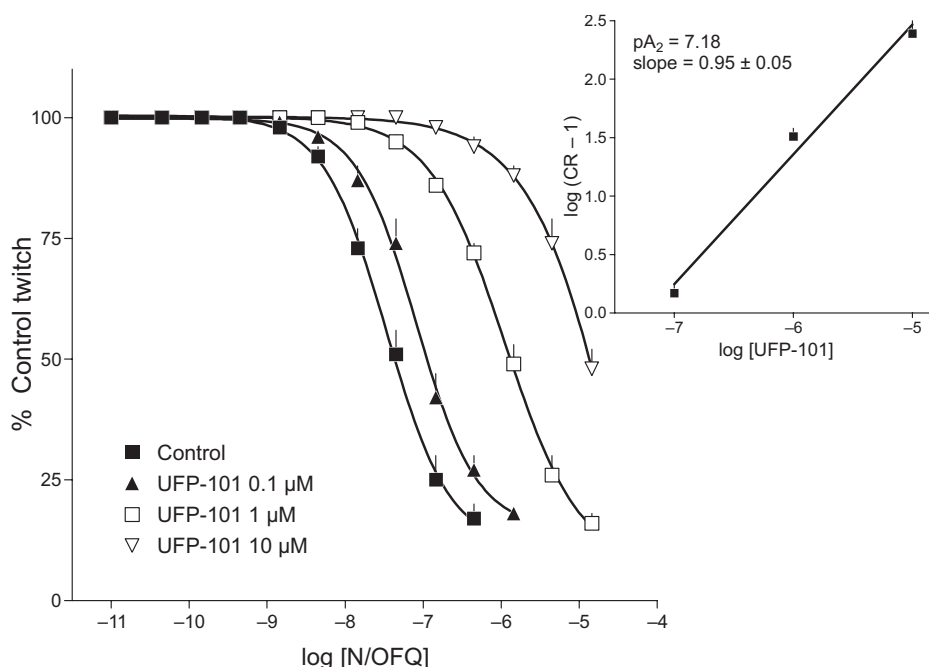


Fig. 1. Effects of UFP-101 on the inhibitory effects of nociceptin/orphanin FQ (N/OFQ) in the electrically stimulated mouse vas deferens. The relative Schild plot is shown in the insert. The data are means $\pm$ S.E.M. of at least 5 separate experiments.

UFP-101 binds with high affinity (pK_i 10.2) and selectivity (~ 3000 fold over classical opioid receptors) to the human recombinant NOP receptor expressed in CHO cells (11). In functional studies, such as the stimulation of $GTP\gamma[^{35}S]$ binding and the inhibition of forskolin stimulated cAMP accumulation in CHO/NOP cells, UFP-101 competitively antagonized N/OFQ effects being inactive *per se* (Table 1). In the $GTP\gamma[^{35}S]$ binding assay, UFP-101 antagonistic properties were also confirmed against a panel of NOP agonists including the peptides N/OFQ(1–13)NH₂, [(pF)Phe⁴]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ and [Arg¹⁴, Lys¹⁵]N/OFQ, and the non-peptide Ro 64-6198 (64). In the same CHO/NOP preparation, UFP-101 also prevented the internalization of NOP binding sites induced by N/OFQ, being inactive when tested alone (27).

The pure and competitive antagonistic profile of UFP-101 was confirmed using preparations expressing native NOP receptors and bioassay, neurochemical and electrophysiological techniques (see Table 1 and, as an example of Schild analysis, Fig. 1). Similar results were also obtained using tissues of human origin such as the isolated bronchus and monocytes where UFP-101 antagonized N/OFQ inhibition of electrically induced contractions (1) and chemotaxis (92), respectively.

With respect to antagonist potency, in the various preparations UFP-101 displayed pA_2 values in the range 7.0–7.7, with the only exception of the $GTP\gamma[^{35}S]$ binding assay where a pA_2 value of 9.1 was obtained. Similar pA_2 values in the various preparations have been obtained with other NOP selective antagonists such as the peptide

[Nphe¹]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ (range 6.0–6.7) (8,10) and the non peptide J-113397 (range 7.4–8.2) (3,10). Collectively, these data demonstrated that the functional sites, which mediated the effects of N/OFQ in the various preparations belong to the same receptor type, i.e., the NOP receptor.

The antagonist potency of UFP-101 is approximately ten fold higher than that of the NOP antagonist [Nphe¹]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ (8,9); this difference in potency is similar to that of the agonists N/OFQ and [Arg¹⁴, Lys¹⁵]N/OFQ (76,86). Therefore, the insertion of Arg-Lys in position 14 and 15 produces the same effects (increase of potency, no changes in efficacy) when applied to either the agonist (N/OFQ) or antagonist ([Nphe¹]N/OFQ) chemical templates (37).

Collectively data obtained *in vitro* in a variety of preparations with different approaches demonstrated that UFP-101 behaves as a potent, competitive and selective antagonist at NOP receptors.

***In Vivo* Actions of UFP-101**

In vivo, UFP-101 has been challenged with N/OFQ in a series of experiments aimed at the investigation of the role of the N/OFQ-NOP receptor system in regulating various biological functions including pain transmission, locomotor activity, mood-related behaviors, drug abuse, food intake and cardiovascular, kidney and gastrointestinal functions (Table 2). In the following sections the actions of UFP-101 will be briefly summarized and discussed relative to data obtained with other NOP antagonists (particularly J-113397 and [Nphe¹]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂), with NOP^{-/-} and ppN/OFQ^{-/-} mice, and oligo antisense or antibodies targeting the peptide or the receptor.

Pain transmission

The relationships between the N/OFQ – NOP receptor system and pain transmission are complex (100). Most of the available data suggest that N/OFQ signaling has opposite actions at supraspinal and spinal levels being pronociceptive in the brain and antinociceptive in the spinal cord. The data we obtained using the tail withdrawal assay in mice are consistent with this view. In fact, N/OFQ given intracerebroventricularly (i.c.v.) in the 0.1–10 nmol dose range produces clear pronociceptive effects (7) while it evokes antinociceptive actions when administered intrathecally (i.t.) (84). Both these actions of N/OFQ are no longer evident in animals treated with 10 nmol of UFP-101 (11) (Fig. 2). This indicates that NOP receptors are involved in both actions. This conclusion is corroborated by knockout studies which demonstrated that both the supraspinal pronociceptive and spinal antinociceptive effects of N/OFQ are no longer evident in NOP^{-/-} mice (73, 84). Worthy of mention are the effects produced by UFP-101 alone: the peptide evoked a clear antinociceptive effect when given i.c.v. (11) whilst being inactive following spinal administration (Fig. 2). These results may suggest a tonic activation of the endogenous N/OFQ – NOP receptor supraspinal (but not spinal) system and this view is strengthened by the fact that i.c.v. administration of other NOP receptor peptide antagonists such as [Nphe¹]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ (8) and retroN/OFQ-methyl-ester (41) produced similar effects. However, it should be noted that conflicting results have been reported with non-peptide NOP antagonists given systemically with no effect reported for J-113397 (78) and

TABLE 2. In vivo pharmacological profile of UFP-101

Test/Assay	N/OFQ action	Effective dose	UFP-101 action	Effective dose	References
Tail withdrawal (m, i.c.v.)	↓ TW latencies	1 nmol	antagonism*	10 nmol	(11)
Tail withdrawal (m, i.t.)	↑ TW latencies	1 nmol	antagonism	10 nmol	(84)
Locomotion (m, i.c.v.)	↓ spontaneous LA	1 nmol	antagonism	10 nmol	(11)
Locomotion (m, i.c.v.)	↑/↓ spontaneous LA	0.1–5 nmol	antagonism	10 nmol	(53)
Rotarod (r, SNc)	↓ performance	0.1 nmol	antagonism*	1 nmol	(63)
Electromyography (r, SNc)	↓ muscle tone	10 nmol	antagonism*	30 nmol	(63)
Bar test (r, SNc)	ND	—	↓ catalepsia	30 nmol	(62)
Forced swimming (m, i.c.v.)	no effect	—	↓ immobility time	3 nmol	(30)
Forced swimming (r, i.c.v.)	ND	—	↓ immobility time	10 nmol	(31)
Tail suspension (m, i.c.v.)	no effect	—	↓ immobility time	10 nmol	(31)
Microdialysis (r, SNc)	↑ nigral Glu	10 μM	antagonism*	10 μM	Marti et al., PC
Microdialysis (r, SNc)	↓ striatal DA	10 μM	antagonism*	10 μM	(63)
Microdialysis (m, i.c.v.)	↓ accumbal DA	7 nmol	antagonism	5 nmol	(47)
Food intake (r, i.c.v.)	↑ food intake	4 nmol	antagonism	12 nmol	Polidori et al., PC
Cardiovascular (gp, i.v.)	↓ heart rate & blood pressure	6 nmol	antagonism	60 nmol	(38)
Cardiovascular (gp, i.v.)	↓ blood NE	6 nmol	antagonism	60 nmol	(38)
Kidney function (m, i.c.v.)	↑ diuresis	3 nmol	antagonism	30 nmol	Kapusta et al., PC
Kidney function (r, i.c.v.)	↑ diuresis	3 nmol	antagonism	30 nmol	Kapusta et al., PC
Gastric function (r, i.c.v.)	↓ alcohol induced lesions	0.5 nmol	antagonism	2 nmol	(71)
Gastric function (r, i.p.)	↓ alcohol induced lesions	2 nmol	antagonism	20 nmol	(71)

Abbreviations: m, mouse; r, rat; gp, guinea pig; SNc, substantia nigra pars compacta; i.c.v., intracerebroventricular; i.t., intrathecal; i.v., intravenous; TW, tail withdrawal; LA, locomotor activity; ND, not determined; Glu, glutamate; DA, dopamine; NE, norepinephrine; PC, personal communication.

*In these assays UFP-101 per se induces changes opposite to that evoke by N/OFQ: This suggests a tonic control of these biological functions by N/OFQergic pathways.

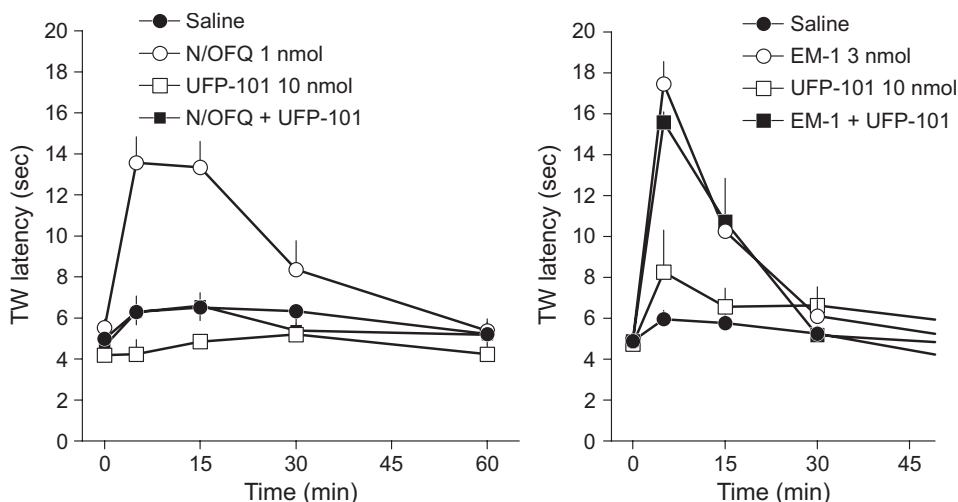


Fig. 2. Effects of UFP-101 against nociceptin/orphanin FQ (N/OFQ)- and endomorphin-1 (EM-1)-mediated antinociceptive effects in the mouse tail withdrawal assay. All compounds were given intrathecally. Data are means $\pm$ S.E.M. of at least 12 mice per group.

antinociceptive effects reported for JTC-801 (91) (which displays low NOP selectivity). Moreover, the lack of effect of UFP-101 after spinal administration in the tail withdrawal assay does not exclude the possibility that the spinal N/OFQ system can be activated under different experimental conditions. The results obtained by the group of Zeilhofer are worthy of mention: knockout mice for either the NOP receptor or the ppN/OFQ gene displayed a similar hyperalgesic phenotype in the formalin test (24) and, in this assay, pronociceptive actions have been reported in response to systemic administration of J-113397 to rats (96) and, more recently, to mice (85). Experiments are under way in our laboratories to investigate the action of UFP-101 after i.c.v. and i.t. administration in the mouse formalin test.

In summary, although much remains to be done before reaching a firm conclusion on this topic, the available information indicates that the net effect on pain threshold of blocking N/OFQergic signaling strongly depends on both the level of transmission (spinal vs. supraspinal) and on the type of nociceptive stimulus adopted (acute vs. tonic).

Locomotor activity

In the first paper reporting the identification of N/OFQ as the endogenous ligand of the NOP receptor it was shown that, after i.c.v. injection, the peptide reduces spontaneous locomotor activity in mice (80). This effect was later confirmed both in mice (74,82) and in rats (26) and was demonstrated to be exclusively due to NOP receptor activation by both receptor antagonist {e.g., [Nphe¹]NOFQ(1–13)-NH₂ (82)} and in knockout (73) studies. In agreement with these findings, UFP-101 prevented the inhibitory effect of i.c.v. N/OFQ on spontaneous locomotor activity in mice (11). Similar results were also obtained by Kuzmin et al. who demonstrated that UFP-101 antagonized the inhibitory effects of the NOP selective non-peptide agonist Ro 64-6198 (53). At doses effective against N/OFQ, UFP-101 did not modify locomotor activity *per se* (11) suggesting that this

function is not under the tonic control of the N/OFQ endogenous system. Different and interesting results were recently obtained by the group of Morari on the effects of N/OFQ on rat rotarod performance. N/OFQ microinjected in the substantia nigra pars reticulata impaired animal performance on the rotarod apparatus. This effect was sensitive to UFP-101, which, when tested alone, produced an effect opposite to that of the natural ligand enhancing animal performance (63). The involvement of the NOP receptor in this action of UFP-101 is suggested by the fact that similar results were obtained by both intranigral and systemic administration of J-113397 and that NOP^{-/-} mice outperformed NOP^{+/+} animals in the rotarod test (63). Collectively, these results indicate that endogenous N/OFQergic pathways are activated during exercise-driven locomotion and inhibit motor performance. On the basis of these experimental data NOP selective antagonists are worthy of evaluation in the treatment of conditions characterized by hypo-locomotion, such as Parkinson's disease. The very recent observation (62) that UFP-101 reverses haloperidol induced akinesia (a model of functional parkinsonism) further strengthens this view.

Mood-related behaviors

Using the mouse forced swimming test, an animal model widely used for the screening of potential antidepressants (23), it has been shown that two chemically unrelated NOP receptor antagonists, [Nphe¹]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ and J-113397 given i.c.v. and i.p., respectively, produce a dose-dependent reduction of immobility time. Under the same experimental conditions, N/OFQ and the non-selective opioid receptor antagonist naloxone are inactive (79). This initial observation was later confirmed and extended using UFP-101. This NOP receptor antagonist dose-dependently reduced the immobility time in the mouse forced swimming assay and its effects were reversed by the co-administration of N/OFQ, which was inactive when tested alone (30). In addition, NOP^{-/-} mice showed a reduced immobility time compared to that observed in wild-type animals (30). The antidepressant-like properties of the NOP antagonist UFP-101 were further explored across species (mice and rats) and assays (forced swimming and tail suspension tests). UFP-101 reduced immobility time of mice subjected to the tail suspension test and NOP^{-/-} animals also displayed an antidepressant-like phenotype in this assay (31). UFP-101 decreased immobility time and increased climbing time in rats submitted to the forced swimming test (31). Thus, results obtained using combined pharmacological and genetic approaches, indicate that blockade of the N/OFQ-NOP receptor signaling in the brain produces antidepressant-like effects in distinct species and animal models and support the NOP receptor as a candidate target for the development of innovative antidepressant drugs.

Little is known about the mechanism by which UFP-101 (and the other NOP selective antagonists) elicits its antidepressant-like effects. It should be noted at this point that UFP-101 antagonizes N/OFQ-induced presynaptic inhibition of norepinephrine (61) and serotonin (11) release in cortical preparations, and also prevents K⁺-channel-mediated hyperpolarization triggered by N/OFQ in both locus coeruleus and dorsal raphe neurons (31). The antidepressant-like effects of UFP-101 in the mouse forced swimming test were clearly reduced in animals pretreated with the serotonin synthesis inhibitor PCPA (31). Although the involvement of other mechanisms and neurochemical systems can not be ruled out, these series of experiments suggest that the serotonergic system is implicated in the antidepressant-like effects induced by NOP antagonists, which might be brought about by

their ability to prevent the inhibitory actions of N/OFQ on dorsal raphe neurons and/or on their terminals in the cerebral cortex.

Drug abuse

In contrast to opioids, N/OFQ does not produce either preference or aversion in the conditioned place preference test (25). On the other hand, the peptide inhibits conditioned place preference to various drugs of abuse including morphine (17,72,88), cocaine (49,88), alcohol (18,52), amphetamine (50), and methamphetamine (101). In some of these studies, the involvement of NOP receptors in the action of N/OFQ was demonstrated with the use of the peptide antagonist [Nphe¹]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ (18,101). More recently, the ability of buprenorphine to modulate ethanol intake in alcohol-preferring rats has been investigated (19). Buprenorphine is a partial agonist at classical opioid receptors but is also able to activate the NOP receptor although with low potency (95). At low doses, buprenorphine increased ethanol consumption whereas at high doses the drug reduced it. The effects of low doses of buprenorphine were antagonized by naltrexone while those evoked by high doses were inhibited by UFP-101. These results suggest that buprenorphine possesses dualistic effects on ethanol consumption; low doses stimulate alcohol intake via activation of classic opioid receptors while higher doses reduce alcohol intake via activation of NOP receptors (19). Similar results were obtained investigating by Lutfy et al. (59) who demonstrated, using receptor antagonist (J-113397) and knockout (NOP^{-/-} mice), that the reduced analgesic effect of high doses of buprenorphine is due to NOP receptor activation.

Cardiovascular and kidney function

N/OFQ produces significant changes in cardiovascular and renal function following administration into the periphery or central nervous system in different animal species. With respect to peripheral effects, i.v. bolus N/OFQ produces a rapid and dose-dependent hypotension and bradycardia in conscious or anesthetized animals. These responses are insensitive to treatment with the non-selective opioid antagonist, naloxone (13,32,60). Instead, as demonstrated in rats, mice and guinea pigs, the reduction in heart rate, mean arterial pressure and corresponding decrease in plasma norepinephrine concentration produced by i.v. bolus N/OFQ are prevented by i.v. pretreatment with the selective NOP receptor antagonists [Nphe¹]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ (15,89) or UFP-101 (38). At a time when the cardiovascular responses to i.v. bolus N/OFQ (100 nmol/kg) are blocked by high dose UFP-101 pre-treatment (900 nmol/kg, i.v.) the cardiovascular depressor, water diuretic and renal sympathoinhibitory responses to injection of N/OFQ (or NOP receptor partial agonists) into the brain (5.5. nmol, i.c.v.) are not altered (45). Collectively, these findings suggest that UFP-101 has limited (if any) ability to cross the blood-brain barrier and that this selective NOP receptor antagonist may be useful to differentiate cardiovascular responses evoked by activation of endogenous peripheral versus central NOP receptor systems.

N/OFQ also produces hypotension, bradycardia and water diuresis following administration into the brain (42). In urethane anesthetized rats, pretreatment with [Nphe¹]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂ prevented the hypotensive and bradycardic responses produced by microinjection of N/OFQ into the lateral ventricle (15) and commissural subnucleus of the nucleus tractus solitarius (90). Similarly, pretreatment of conscious rats with UFP-101 into the paraventricular nucleus of the hypothalamus antagonized the cardiovas-

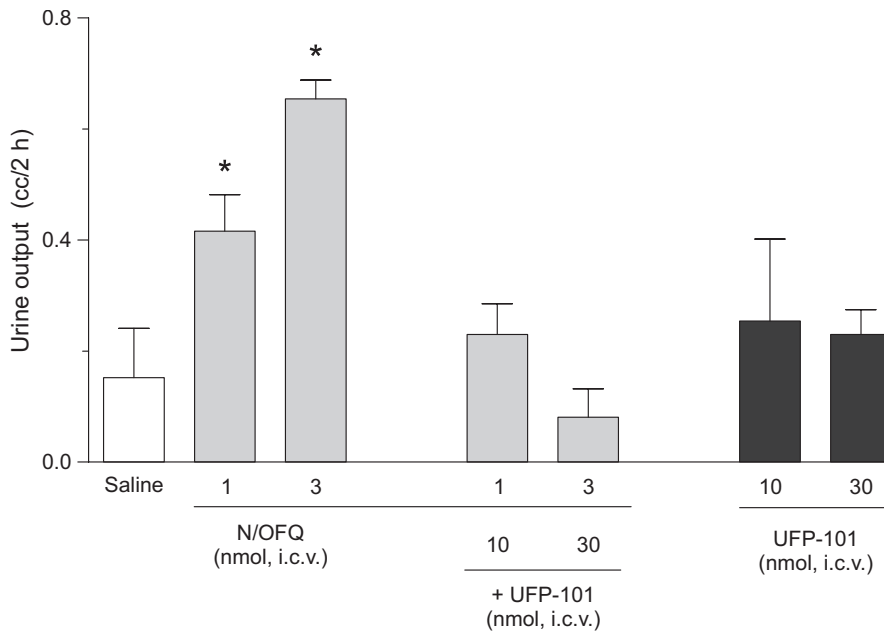


Fig. 3. Effects of UFP-101 on changes in cumulative (2 h) urine output produced by the i.c.v. injection of nociceptin/orphanin FQ (N/OFQ) in conscious CD-1 mice. i.c.v. UFP-101 (10 or 30 nmol) was administered as a pretreatment 2 h prior to N/OFQ (1 or 3 nmol) injection. Data are mean $\pm$ S.E.M. of at least 10 mice per group. * $p < 0.05$, significantly different from the effect of saline.

cular depressor and diuretic responses to microinjection of N/OFQ into this brain site (51). In recent studies and as demonstrated in Fig. 3, we have shown that central pretreatment (2 h) of CD-1 mice with UFP-101 (10 or 30 nmol, i.c.v.), which itself did not alter urine output, prevented the diuretic response produced by i.c.v. N/OFQ (1 or 3 nmol). In related studies, we have also observed that renal excretory function is not altered in CD-1 mice following i.c.v. co-injection of N/OFQ (3 nmol) and UFP-101 (30 nmol) (Rizzi and Kapusta, personal communication). In contrast to these findings, it should be noted that in rats (mice not tested), i.c.v. injection of NOP receptor partial agonists [e.g., Phe¹y(CH₂-H)Gly²]N/OFQ(1–13)-NH₂] produce cardiovascular (bradycardia and hypotension) and renal excretory responses (water diuresis) similar to those elicited by central N/OFQ (43). These findings indicate that the cardiovascular and renal responses produced by i.c.v. N/OFQ involve central NOP receptor activation and that this system can be affected differently by selective NOP receptor antagonists and partial agonists.

CONCLUSIONS

Current *in vitro* and *in vivo* data obtained with different approaches, techniques and models converge in demonstrating that UFP-101 is a useful pharmacological tool for the investigation of the central and peripheral biological functions regulated by the

N/OFQ – NOP receptor system and for defining the therapeutic potential of NOP receptor ligands.

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