Neurosteroids Allopregnanolone Sulfate and Pregnanolone Sulfate Have Diverse Effect on the α Subunit of the Neuronal Voltage-gated Sodium Channels Na\textsubscript{v}1.2, Na\textsubscript{v}1.6, Na\textsubscript{v}1.7, and Na\textsubscript{v}1.8 Expressed in Xenopus Oocytes

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ABSTRACT

Background: The neurosteroids allopregnanolone and pregnanolone are potent positive modulators of γ-aminobutyric acid type A receptors. Antinociceptive effects of allopregnanolone have attracted much attention because recent reports have indicated the potential of allopregnanolone as a therapeutic agent for refractory pain. However, the analgesic mechanisms of allopregnanolone are still unclear. Voltage-gated sodium channels (Na\textsubscript{v}) are thought to play important roles in inflammatory and neuropathic pain, but there have been few investigations on the effects of allopregnanolone on sodium channels.

Methods: Using voltage-clamp techniques, the effects of allopregnanolone sulfate (APAS) and pregnanolone sulfate (PAS) on sodium current were examined in Xenopus oocytes expressing Na\textsubscript{v}1.2, Na\textsubscript{v}1.6, Na\textsubscript{v}1.7, and Na\textsubscript{v}1.8 α subunits.

Results: APAS suppressed sodium currents of Na\textsubscript{v}1.2, Na\textsubscript{v}1.6, and Na\textsubscript{v}1.7 at a holding potential causing half-maximal current in a concentration-dependent manner, whereas it markedly enhanced sodium current of Na\textsubscript{v}1.8 at a holding potential causing maximal current. Half-maximal inhibitory concentration values for Na\textsubscript{v}1.2, Na\textsubscript{v}1.6, and Na\textsubscript{v}1.7 were 12 ± 4 (n = 6), 41 ± 2 (n = 7), and 131 ± 15 (n = 5) μmol/l (mean ± SEM), respectively. The effects of PAS were lower than those of APAS. From gating analysis, two compounds increased inactivation of all α subunits, while they showed different actions on activation of each α subunit. Moreover, two compounds showed a use-dependent block on Na\textsubscript{v}1.2, Na\textsubscript{v}1.6, and Na\textsubscript{v}1.7.

Conclusion: APAS and PAS have diverse effects on sodium currents in oocytes expressing four α subunits. APAS inhibited the sodium currents of Na\textsubscript{v}1.2 most strongly. (Anesthesiology 2014; 121:620-31)

What We Already Know about This Topic

• Sodium channels are important targets for analgesic actions in the spinal cord, but their role in neurosteroid analgesia is unclear
• The effects of two sulfated neurosteroids with analgesic and anesthetic properties were tested on heterologously expressed rat voltage-gated sodium channel function

What This Article Tells Us That Is New

• The neurosteroids tested produced voltage and use-dependent block of all the subtypes tested, with more potent effects on Na\textsubscript{v}1.2
• Inhibition of Na\textsubscript{v}1.2 in the spinal cord by allopregnanolone is a plausible mechanism for its analgesic effects if confirmed in neuronal preparations and pain models

EUROSTEROIDS are neuroactive steroids synthesized from cholesterol in both central and peripheral nervous systems, and they accumulate in the nervous system.¹ They rapidly alter neuronal excitability by mediating actions through ion-gated neurotransmitter receptors, but not through classic steroid hormone nuclear receptors.² Many of them are converted to sulfated metabolites by hydroxysteroid sulfotransferases, and neurosteroid sulfates are also known to regulate physiological processes. They are thought to be potentially therapeutic because of their many pharmacological properties.³,⁴,⁵

Two 3α-hydroxylated metabolites of progesterone, allopregnanolone (3α-hydroxy-5α-pregnane-20-one) and pregnanolone (3α-hydroxy-5β-pregnane-20-one), are known to be positive modulators at γ-aminobutyric acid type A (GABA\textsubscript{A}) receptors with high potency.⁶ These neurosteroids have been shown to have greater anesthetic potencies than those of other intravenous anesthetics that are clinically used, and not to cause acute tolerance that are observed in other

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anesthetics, suggesting usefulness of these neurosteroids as general anesthetics. On the contrary, allopregnanolone was shown to have the most potent analgesic effects among all neurosteroids in pain models. Recent studies demonstrated its analgesic effects in neuropathic pain models. Allopregnanolone alleviates thermal and mechanical hyperalgesia by ligation of the sciatic nerve in rats, produces analgesic effects on formalin-induced pain in rats, and prevents antinecancer drug oxaliplatin-induced cold and mechanical allodynia and hyperalgesia. In addition, it was suggested that stimulation of allopregnanolone synthesis might be involved in the antinoceptive effects of several analgesic drugs in neuropathic pain models. Its effect on GABA_A receptors may be important for its antinociceptive properties because GABA is involved in pain pathways in the nervous systems, and drugs targeting subtypes of GABA receptors have analgesic effects in chronic pain. However, these two neurosteroids, allopregnanolone and pregnanolone, also act on other ion channels in pain signaling pathways, including T-type calcium channels and N-methyl-D-aspartate receptors.

Voltage-gated sodium channels (Na_v) have an important role in action potential initiation and propagation in excitable nerve and muscle cells. Nine α subunits (Na_v1.1 to Na_v1.9) and four auxiliary β subunits have been identified in mammals. Each pore-forming α subunit has a different pattern of development and localization and has distinct physiological and pathophysiological roles. Sodium channel α subunits expressed in the dorsal root ganglion are considered possible targets for analgesics for inflammatory and neuropathic pain. However, there has been little investigation on the effects of allopregnanolone on sodium channel function. It is important to examine these effects because they may be useful in clarifying the mechanisms of the analgesic effects of allopregnanolone and developing natural and safe neurosteroid-based analgesics for refractory pain. In addition, our recent report demonstrated the importance of neurosteroid sulfonation for regulation of ion channels because of more potent effects of sulfated steroid than those of nonsulfated steroids. This study was approved by the Animal Research Committee of the University of Occupational and Environmental Health, Kitakyushu, Japan.

**Materials and Methods**

This study was approved by the Animal Research Committee of the University of Occupational and Environmental Health, Kitakyushu, Japan.

**Drugs**

Allopregnanolone sulfate and PAS were purchased from Steraloids, Inc. (Newport, RI). The structures of allopregnanolone sulfate (APAS) and pregnanolone sulfate (PAS) are shown in Fig. 1.

![Fig. 1. Structures of allopregnanolone sulfate (APAS) and pregnanolone sulfate (PAS).](image)

**Plasmids**

Rat Na_v1.2 α subunit complementary DNA (cDNA) was a gift from Dr. William A. Catterall, Ph.D. (Professor, Department of Pharmacology, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington). Rat Na_v1.6 α subunit cDNA was a gift from Dr. Alan L. Goldin, M.D., Ph.D. (Professor, Department of Anatomy and Neurobiology, University of California, Irvine, California). Rat Na_v1.7 α subunit cDNA was a gift from Gail Mandel, Ph.D. (Professor, Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, Oregon Health and Science University, Portland, Oregon). Rat Na_v1.8 α subunit cDNA was a gift from Dr. Armen N. Akopian, Ph.D. (Assistant Professor, University of Texas Health Science Center, San Antonio, Texas), and human β subunit cDNA was a gift from Dr. Alfred L. George, Jr., M.D. (Professor, Department of Pharmacology, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee). The percentages of homology between rat and human protein of Na_v1.2, Na_v1.6, Na_v1.7, and Na_v1.8 are 98, 99, 93, and 83%, respectively, suggesting the possible limitations imposed by using rat α subunit for only Na_v1.8 to make conclusions in humans.

**Complementary RNA (cRNA) Preparation and Oocyte Injection**

After linearization of cDNA with ClaI (Na_v1.2 α subunit), NotI (Na_v1.6, 1.7 α subunits), XbaI (Na_v1.8 α subunit), and EcoRI (β subunit), cRNAs were transcribed using SP6 (Na_v1.8 α, β subunits) or T7 (Na_v1.2, 1.6, and 1.7 α subunits) RNA polymerase from the mMESSAGE mMACHINE kit (Ambion, Austin, TX). Adult female *Xenopus laevis* frogs were obtained from Kyudo Co., Ltd. (Saga, Japan). *X. laevis* oocytes and cRNA microinjection were prepared as described previously. Na_v α subunit cRNAs were coincjected with β subunit cRNA at a ratio of 1:10 (total volume was 20 to 40 ng/50 nl) into *Xenopus* oocytes (all α subunits were coincjected with the β subunit) that were randomly assigned to four α subunit groups for injection. Injected oocytes were incubated at 19°C in incubation medium, and 2 to 6 days after injection, the cells were used for electrophysiological recordings. All electrical recordings were performed at room temperature (23°C). Oocytes were placed in a 100-μl recording chamber.
and perfused at 2 ml/min with Frog Ringer’s solution containing 115 mmol/l NaCl, 2.5 mmol/l KCl, 10 mmol/l HEPES, 1.8 mmol/l CaCl₂, pH 7.2, using a peristaltic pump (World Precision Instruments Inc., Sarasota, FL). Recording electrodes were prepared, and the whole-cell voltage clamp and recordings were achieved as described previously. Transients and leak currents were subtracted using the P/N procedure, in which N subsweps each 1/Nth of the amplitude of the main stimulus waveform (P) are applied. APAS and PAS stocks were prepared in dimethylsulfoxide and diluted in Frog Ringer’s solution to a final dimethylsulfoxide concentration not exceeding 0.05%. APAS and PAS were perfused for 3 min to reach equilibrium. All recordings were performed by the experimenters who were blind to the type of compound.

The voltage dependence of activation was determined using 50-ms depolarizing pulses from a holding potential causing maximal current (Vmax) (−90 mV for Naᵥ₁.2 and Naᵥ₁.6, −100 mV for Naᵥ₁.7 and Naᵥ₁.8) and from a holding potential causing half-maximal current (V₁/₂) (from approximately −40 mV to −70 mV) to 60 mV in 10-mV increments. Vmax and V₁/₂ holding potentials induce resting and inactivated states of sodium channels. Because the effects of many analgesics in the inactivated state are known to be important for analgesic action, we used these two different holding potentials to compare the effects of compounds in the resting and inactivated states. Normalized activation curves were fitted to the Boltzmann equation as described previously; briefly, G/Gₘₐₓ = 1/(1 + exp(V₁/₂ − V)/k), where G is the voltage-dependent sodium conductance, Gₘₐₓ is the maximal sodium conductance, G/Gₘₐₓ is the normalized fractional conductance, V₁/₂ is the potential at which activation is half maximal, and k is the slope factor. To measure steady-state inactivation, currents were elicited by a 50-ms test pulse to −20 mV for Naᵥ₁.2 and Naᵥ₁.6, −10 mV for Naᵥ₁.7, and +10 mV for Naᵥ₁.8 after 200 ms (500 ms for only Naᵥ₁.8) prepulses ranging from −140 to 0 mV in 10-mV increments from a holding potential of Vmax. Steady-state inactivation curves were fitted to the Boltzmann equation: I/Iₘₐₓ = 1/(1 + exp(V₁/₂ − V)/k), where Iₘₐₓ is the maximal sodium current, I/Iₘₐₓ is the normalized current, V₁/₂ is the voltage of half-maximal inactivation, and k is the slope factor. To investigate a use-dependent sodium channel block, currents were elicited at 10 Hz by a 20-ms depolarizing pulse of −20 mV for Naᵥ₁.2 and Naᵥ₁.6, −10 mV for Naᵥ₁.7, and +10 mV for Naᵥ₁.8 from a V₁/₂ holding potential in both the absence and presence of 100 μmol/l APAS and PAS. Peak currents were measured and normalized to the first pulse and plotted against the pulse number. Data were fitted to the monoexponential equation Iₙ = exp(−τ_use·n) + C, where n is pulse number, C is the plateau Iₙ, and τ use is the time constant of use-dependent decay.

**Statistical Analysis**

The GraphPad Prism software (GraphPad Software, Inc., San Diego, CA) was used to perform the statistical analysis, and a statistical power analysis was performed using G*Power software. All values are presented as means ± SEM. The n values refer to the number of oocytes examined. Each experiment was performed with oocytes taken from at least two frogs. Data were statistically evaluated by paired t test (two-tailed). We assessed the inhibitory effects at different APAS concentrations in the concentration–response curve, using one-way ANOVA followed by Dunnet post hoc test for multiple comparisons. Hill slope, half-maximal inhibitory concentration (IC₅₀), and half-maximal effective concentration

![Fig. 2](http://anesthesiology.pubs.asahq.org/pdfaccess.ashx?url=/data/journals/jasa/931036/ on 07/24/2018)
(EC$_{50}$) values were also calculated. $P$ value less than 0.05 was considered to indicate a significant difference.

**Results**

**Effects of APAS and PAS on Peak Na$^+$ Inward Currents Elicited from Two Different Holding Potentials**

Currents were elicited using a 50-ms depolarizing pulse to $-20$ mV for Na$_v$1.2 and Na$_v$1.6, $-10$ mV for Na$_v$1.7, and $+10$ mV for Na$_v$1.8 applied every 10 s from a $V_{\text{max}}$ or $V_{1/2}$ holding potential in both the absence and presence of 100 $\mu$mol/l APAS and PAS (fig. 2). The amplitude of expressed sodium currents was typically 2 to 15 $\mu$A, and oocytes that showed a maximal current greater than 20 $\mu$A were not included in the data collection in all the following experiments. APAS had dual effects on sodium currents depending on the holding potential and $\alpha$ subunit (figs. 2 and 3). At $V_{1/2}$, APAS reduced the peak $I_{Na}$ (sodium current) induced by Na$_v$1.2, Na$_v$1.6, and Na$_v$1.7 by $79 \pm 1\%$, $71 \pm 2\%$, and $49 \pm 3\%$, respectively. At $V_{\text{max}}$, APAS also reduced $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.2 by $60 \pm 4\%$, whereas it enhanced $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.6 and Na$_v$1.7 by $15 \pm 6\%$ and $14 \pm 1\%$, respectively, although these effects were small. In contrast, APAS greatly enhanced $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.8 at both $V_{1/2}$ and $V_{\text{max}}$ by $112 \pm 34\%$ and $202 \pm 14\%$, respectively (fig. 3A). PAS reduced $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.2, Na$_v$1.6, and Na$_v$1.7 at $V_{1/2}$ by $54 \pm 4\%$, $71 \pm 1\%$, and $48 \pm 2\%$, respectively. Effects of PAS on $I_{Na}$ at $V_{\text{max}}$ were smaller than those at $V_{1/2}$, and the magnitudes of inhibitory effects on Na$_v$1.2, Na$_v$1.6, and Na$_v$1.7 were $31 \pm 5\%$, $10 \pm 1\%$, and $6 \pm 1\%$, respectively. While PAS enhanced $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.8 at $V_{\text{max}}$ by $39 \pm 6\%$, it did not affect $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.8 at $V_{1/2}$ (fig. 3B). In summary, PAS inhibited $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.2, Na$_v$1.6, and Na$_v$1.7 at both $V_{1/2}$ and $V_{\text{max}}$ holding potentials. APAS had inverse effects on Na$_v$1.6 and Na$_v$1.7 according to the different holding potentials, whereas it suppressed $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.2 at both $V_{1/2}$ and $V_{\text{max}}$. Moreover, APAS markedly enhanced $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.8 at both $V_{1/2}$ and $V_{\text{max}}$.

Next, we examined the concentration–response relationship for suppression of the peak $I_{Na}$ induced through Na$_v$1.2, Na$_v$1.6, and Na$_v$1.7 by APAS and PAS at $V_{1/2}$ holding potential because suppression by both neurosteroids of these $\alpha$ subunits at $V_{1/2}$ was more potent than that at $V_{\text{max}}$ (fig. 4, A and B). In addition, we investigated the concentration–response relationship for potentiation of the peak $I_{Na}$ of Na$_v$1.8 by APAS and PAS at $V_{\text{max}}$, because both neurosteroids showed potent enhancement of $I_{Na}$ at $V_{\text{max}}$ compared with that at $V_{1/2}$ (fig. 4C). IC$_{50}$ values, EC$_{50}$ values, and Hill slopes calculated from nonlinear regression analyses of the dose–response curves are shown in table 1. From these analyses, the effect of APAS on Na$_v$1.2 was the most potent among the two neurosteroids and four $\alpha$ subunits.

**Effects of APAS and PAS on Activation of Sodium Currents**

We examined the effects of APAS and PAS on four $\alpha$ subunits in sodium current activation. Voltage dependence of activation was determined using 50-ms depolarizing pulses from a holding potential of $V_{\text{max}}$ to 50 mV in 10-mV increments or from a holding potential of $V_{1/2}$ to 60 mV in 10-mV increments for Na$_v$1.2, Na$_v$1.6, Na$_v$1.7, and Na$_v$1.8 in both the absence and presence of 100 $\mu$mol/l APAS and PAS (fig. 5). Activation curves were derived from the I–V curves (see Electrophysiological Recordings under Materials and Methods). At $V_{\text{max}}$, APAS greatly reduced the peak $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.2, whereas it greatly enhanced the peak $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.8 in the depolarizing region where channel opening begins. It also enhanced the peak $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.6 and Na$_v$1.7, similar to its effects on Na$_v$1.8, although both effects were small. At $V_{1/2}$, APAS greatly suppressed the peak $I_{Na}$ induced by Na$_v$1.2, Na$_v$1.6, and Na$_v$1.7,
but it enhanced the peak $I_{Na}$ induced by $Na_{1.8}$, similar to its effects on $Na_{1.8}$ at $V_{max}$. PAS reduced $I_{Na}$ induced by $Na_{1.2}$, $Na_{1.6}$, and $Na_{1.7}$ at both $V_{1/2}$ and $V_{max}$, whereas it enhanced $I_{Na}$ induced by $Na_{1.8}$ in the depolarizing region at $V_{max}$, but had no effect at $V_{1/2}$.

At $V_{max}$ holding potential, APAS significantly shifted the midpoint of the steady-state activation ($V_{1/2}$) in a depolarizing direction for $Na_{1.2}$, but it significantly shifted $V_{1/2}$ in a hyperpolarizing direction for $Na_{1.6}$, $Na_{1.7}$, and $Na_{1.8}$. At $V_{1/2}$, APAS also shifted $V_{1/2}$ in a similar direction as the shift at $V_{max}$, although the shift was small and not significant, except for $Na_{1.8}$. The shifts of $V_{1/2}$ by PAS were smaller than those by APAS. PAS significantly shifted $V_{1/2}$ in a depolarizing direction for $Na_{1.2}$ and $Na_{1.6}$ at $V_{1/2}$, but it had no or slight effects on all $\alpha$ subunits at $V_{max}$, and on $Na_{1.7}$ and $Na_{1.8}$ at $V_{1/2}$ (fig. 6 and tables 2 and 3).

**Effects of APAS and PAS on Inactivation of Sodium Currents**

We also investigated the effects of APAS and PAS on steady-state inactivation. Currents were elicited by a 50-ms test pulse to $-20$ mV for $Na_{1.2}$ and $Na_{1.6}$, $-10$ mV for $Na_{1.7}$, and $+10$ mV for $Na_{1.8}$ after 200 ms (500 ms for only $Na_{1.8}$) prepulses ranging from $-140$ mV to 0 mV in 10-mV increments from $V_{max}$ holding potential. Steady-state inactivation curves were fitted to the Boltzmann equation (see Electrophysiological Recordings under Materials and Methods). APAS and PAS significantly shifted the midpoint of steady-state inactivation ($V_{1/2}$) in the hyperpolarizing direction for all $\alpha$ subunits; APAS shifted by 8.0, 8.9, 6.7, and 8.9 mV and PAS shifted by 4.5, 8.0, 6.6, and 10.2 mV for $Na_{1.2}$, $Na_{1.6}$, $Na_{1.7}$, and $Na_{1.8}$, respectively (fig. 7 and tables 2 and 3). The effects of APAS and PAS in the hyperpolarizing range were consistent with the effects of these two neurosteroids on the peak $I_{Na}$ at $V_{max}$ and their effects on the $I–V$ curves in the hyperpolarizing range at $V_{max}$.

**Use-dependent Block of Sodium Currents by APAS and PAS**

The use-dependent block of sodium currents by APAS and PAS was also investigated. Currents were elicited at 10 Hz by a 20-ms depolarizing pulse of $-20$ mV for $Na_{1.2}$ and $Na_{1.6}$ and $-10$ mV for $Na_{1.7}$ from a $V_{1/2}$ holding potential in both the absence and presence of 100 $\mu$mol/L APAS and PAS. Peak currents were measured and normalized to the first pulse and plotted against the pulse number (fig. 8, A–D). Data were fitted by the monoexponential equation (see Electrophysiological Recordings under Materials and Methods). APAS significantly reduced the plateau $I_{Na}$ amplitude of $Na_{1.2}$, $Na_{1.6}$, and $Na_{1.7}$ from 0.80 ± 0.03 to 0.57 ± 0.03, 0.89 ± 0.01 to 0.49 ± 0.07, and 0.89 ± 0.02 to 0.62 ± 0.06, respectively (fig. 8E). PAS also reduced the plateau $I_{Na}$ amplitudes of $Na_{1.2}$, $Na_{1.6}$, and $Na_{1.7}$ from 0.81 ± 0.2 to 0.70 ± 0.03, 0.94 ± 0.01 to 0.73 ± 0.02, and 0.91 ± 0.02 to 0.75 ± 0.01, respectively, and the reductions...
were significant except for Na\textsubscript{1.2} (fig. 8F). These results demonstrated a use-dependent block of APAS and PAS on sodium channels, and the block by APAS was more potent than that by PAS.

**Table 1.** Fitted Parameters for Effects of APAS and PAS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>APAS</th>
<th>PAS</th>
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<tr>
<td>IC\textsubscript{50}</td>
<td>EC\textsubscript{50}</td>
<td>Hill Slope</td>
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<tr>
<td>Na\textsubscript{1.2}</td>
<td>12.2 ± 3.5</td>
<td>0.58 ± 0.07</td>
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<td>Na\textsubscript{1.6}</td>
<td>40.6 ± 1.9</td>
<td>0.77 ± 0.03</td>
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<tr>
<td>Na\textsubscript{1.7}</td>
<td>130.7 ± 14.7</td>
<td>0.67 ± 0.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Na\textsubscript{1.8}</td>
<td>61.3 ± 8.5</td>
<td>1.72 ± 0.10</td>
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IC\textsubscript{50} values, EC\textsubscript{50} values, and Hill slopes calculated from nonlinear regression analyses of the dose–response curves shown in figure 4. Data are given as mean ± SEM; n = 6 (Na\textsubscript{1.2}), 7 (Na\textsubscript{1.6}), 5 (Nav\textsubscript{a1.7}), and 5 (Nav\textsubscript{a1.8}).

APAS = allopregnanolone sulfate; EC\textsubscript{50} = half-maximal effective concentration; IC\textsubscript{50} = half-maximal inhibitory concentration; Na\textsubscript{a} = voltage-gated sodium channel; PAS = pregnanolone sulfate.

Fig. 5. Effects of allopregnanolone sulfate (APAS) on I–V curves of sodium currents in oocytes expressing Na\textsubscript{1.2} (a) (n = 5), Na\textsubscript{1.6} (b) (n = 7), Na\textsubscript{1.7} (c) (n = 5), or Na\textsubscript{1.8} (d) (n = 6) α subunits with β\textsubscript{1} subunits. Currents were elicited using 50-ms depolarizing steps between −80 and 60 mV in 10-mV increments from a V\textsubscript{max} holding potential and elicited using 50-ms depolarizing steps between −60 and 60 mV in 10-mV increments from a V\textsubscript{1/2} holding potential. (A) Representative INa traces from oocytes expressing Na\textsubscript{1.2} (left) and Na\textsubscript{1.8} (right) with the β\textsubscript{1} subunit in both the absence and presence of 100 μmol/l of APAS at V\textsubscript{max} holding potential are shown. The effects of APAS on normalized I–V curves elicited from V\textsubscript{max} (B) and V\textsubscript{1/2} (C) holding potentials (D) are shown (closed circles, control; open circles, neurosteroids; cross, washout). Peak currents were normalized to the maximal currents observed from −20 to +10 mV. Data are presented as means ± SEM. Nav = voltage-gated sodium channel; V\textsubscript{max} holding potential = holding potential causing maximal current; V\textsubscript{1/2} holding potential = holding potential causing half-maximal current; Wash = washout.
In the current study, we demonstrated that APAS and PAS differentially affected \( I_{Na} \) induced by four \( \alpha \) subunits at both \( V_{max} \) and \( V_{1/2} \) holding potentials. Moreover, we found that both neurosteroids suppress \( Na_1.2, Na_1.6, \) and \( Na_1.7 \) at \( V_{1/2} \) in a concentration-dependent manner. IC\(_{50}\) values indicated that the effect of APAS on \( Na_1.2 \) was most potent among the two compounds and three \( \alpha \) subunits. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first direct evidence of the various effects of these two neurosteroids on neuronal sodium channel \( \alpha \) subunits. It is thought that APAS is synthesized from allopregnanolone by 3\( \alpha \)-hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase.
sulfotransferase in vivo, because 3α-hydroxysteroid sulfotransferase has been isolated in vivo. Therefore, allopregnanolone likely exerts a portion of its effects through APAS, which is its metabolite.

It was reported that the level of endogenous allopregnanolone changes in many physiological and pathological situations within a serum concentration range of 1 to 10 nmol/l. However, it is not clear whether allopregnanolone has an analgesic effect in physiological concentrations. A recent study demonstrated that 1 and 10 μmol/l of allopregnanolone reduced mechanical allodynia and thermal heat hyperalgesia in normal and neuropathic pain models in rats after 10-μl intrathecal injection. Another investigator reported that intrathecal administration of 10 μmol/l of allopregnanolone showed antihyperalgesic effects in hyperalgesic rats after spinal nerve ligation. From these previous studies, concentrations approximately 1 μmol/l allopregnanolone at receptive fields are estimated to have an analgesic effect. In the current study, APAS tended to, albeit not significantly, suppress the I_{Na} of Na_{1.2} at 0.3 μmol/l by 8% and significantly (P < 0.01) inhibited it at 1 μmol/l by 19 ± 2%. The IC_{50} value of Na_{1.2} inhibition by APAS was 12 μmol/l. It was reported that relatively small degrees of sodium channel inhibition could have profound effects on the neuronal firing rate because a 10% inhibition of sodium current reduces the number of action potentials to 10 from a control response of 21 in 750 ms. Therefore, APAS may reduce neuronal firing for Na_{1.2} at a concentration exhibiting the antinociceptive effects of allopregnanolone in animal models, whereas the effects of APAS and PAS on another three α and four α subunits, respectively, may not be pharmacologically relevant because these effects were observed at concentrations over 10 μmol/l. In addition, the effects of hydrophobic compounds—such as neurosteroids—we used tend to be attenuated in the voltage-clamp techniques with Xenopus oocytes, compared with the whole-cell voltage-clamp methods using mammalian cells. Indeed, it was reported that the enhancing effect by allopregnanolone on GABA_A receptor expression system (α_4β_2γ_2L) was more potent in the human embryonic kidney 293 cells system (EC_{50} = 41 ± 2 nmol/l) than that in the Xenopus oocyte system (EC_{50} = 177 ± 2 nmol/l). This may be a limitation of experiments using the Xenopus oocyte expression system; this limitation indicates that APAS might inhibit function of Na_{1.2} more potently in a mammalian cell system than in the oocyte system, however, it also could potentiate Na_{1.8} function more potently in a mammalian cell. Therefore, further investigation is needed to consider the roles of these α subunits in humans.

Analysis of gating revealed common characteristics but also some differences in the effects of APAS and PAS on different α subunits. A common effect on all α subunits was enhancement of inactivation. Because of this enhancement effect, the inhibitions by two compounds at V_{1/2} holding potentials could be interpreted as stronger effects because they shift inactivation curve to the hyperpolarizing direction, which makes the channel into further inactivated state. In contrast, APAS enhanced peak I_{Na} at V_{max} shifted activation in the hyperpolarizing direction, and increased sodium currents in the hyperpolarizing range of the inactivation curves for Na_{1.6}, Na_{1.7}, and Na_{1.8}. These changes indicate that APAS shifts channel gating equilibrium toward the open channel state and activates sodium channels. This action might attenuate the effects on the inactivated state and, especially, lead to enhancement of I_{Na} even in the inactivated state (V_{1/2} holding potential) for Na_{1.8} in spite of the great enhancement of inactivation. However, for Na_{1.2}, APAS profoundly suppressed peak I_{Na} at V_{max} shifted activation in the depolarizing direction at V_{1/2}, and greatly decreased

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**Table 3. Effects of PAS on Activation and Inactivation**

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<tr>
<th>V_{1/2} (mV)</th>
<th>Control</th>
<th>PAS</th>
<th>Shift</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na_{1.2}</td>
<td>−33.4 ± 0.6</td>
<td>−30.5 ± 1.5</td>
<td>+2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na_{1.6}</td>
<td>−32.1 ± 0.5</td>
<td>−32.4 ± 0.8</td>
<td>−0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na_{1.7}</td>
<td>−23.2 ± 0.5</td>
<td>−23.9 ± 0.6</td>
<td>−0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na_{1.8}</td>
<td>−1.4 ± 2.1</td>
<td>−2.3 ± 1.7</td>
<td>−0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inactivation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na_{1.2}</td>
<td>−49.9 ± 0.8</td>
<td>−54.4 ± 1.5**</td>
<td>−4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na_{1.6}</td>
<td>−57.5 ± 0.5</td>
<td>−65.5 ± 0.5***</td>
<td>−8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na_{1.7}</td>
<td>−72.3 ± 1.0</td>
<td>−78.9 ± 1.0***</td>
<td>−6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na_{1.8}</td>
<td>−36.0 ± 1.3</td>
<td>−46.2 ± 1.4**</td>
<td>−10.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

V_{1/2} is calculated from nonlinear regression analyses of activation and inactivation curves (not shown). Data are given as mean ± SEM; n = 6 (Na_{1.2}), 7 (Na_{1.6}), 5 (Na_{1.7}), and 6 (Na_{1.8}). ** P < 0.01; *** P < 0.001 compared with control, based on paired t test (two-tailed).
Neurosteroids Modulate Na⁺ Channel Functions

sodium currents in the hyperpolarizing range of the inactivation curve, indicating that resting channel block is an important mechanism of APAS inhibition for only Na\(_{1,2}\). Both compounds demonstrated use-dependency for inhibition of Na\(_{1,2}\), Na\(_{1,6}\), and Na\(_{1,7}\), suggesting the ability to slow the recovery time from inactivation.\(^{33}\) Many investigators have shown that sodium channel blockers, including local anesthetics, tricyclic antidepressants, and volatile anesthetics, enhance steady-state inactivation with no effect on activation and exhibit use-dependent block.\(^{34–36}\) We demonstrated that APAS enhances inactivation and shows use-dependent block similar to other sodium channel blockers, yet it also has diverse effects on activation according to differences in \(\alpha\) subunits. These actions suggest that APAS may have different binding sites or allosteric conformational mechanisms to change sodium channel function, although further investigation with site-directed mutagenesis is needed to rule out nonspecific membrane effects. PAS may have common binding sites with APAS, because it shows similar effects, although these changes were small.

The \(\alpha\) subunit consists of four homologous domains (I to IV) containing six transmembrane segments (S1 to S6), and one reentrant P-region connecting S5 to S6 (SS1/SS2). Tetrodotoxin-sensitive \(\alpha\) subunits, Na\(_{1,2}\), Na\(_{1,6}\), and Na\(_{1,7}\), are phylogenetically related and show 70 to 80% amino acid sequence identity. In contrast, tetrodotoxin-resistant \(\alpha\) subunits, Na\(_{1,8}\), are phylogenetically distant and show only 55 to 56% sequence identity to the other three \(\alpha\) subunits. In addition, the lengths of amino acid sequences of four \(\alpha\) subunits differed within the range of 1957 to 2005 residues. Therefore, these differences would result in the diversity in neurosteroid action, especially in the effects on channel activation. Indeed, the longest extracellular regions in the \(\alpha\) subunit (IS5 to SS1) are 93, 77, 73, and 66 amino acid residues in Na\(_{1,2}\), Na\(_{1,6}\), Na\(_{1,7}\), and Na\(_{1,8}\), respectively. The diversity in sequence and differences in the effects on activation according to \(\alpha\) subunit may be important for clarifying binding sites and the mechanism of Na\(_{1,2}\) inhibition by APAS in further investigations.

\(\gamma\)-Aminobutyric acid type A receptors have been considered to be important for the analgesic effects of allopregnanolone because it has high potency as a positive GABA\(_A\) modulator compared with other neurosteroids. Pregnanolone also affects GABA\(_A\) receptors in a manner similar to that of allopregnanolone; nevertheless, its analgesic effect is weak. In fact, pregnanolone was shown to reduce mechanical allodynia without reduction of thermal heat hyperalgesia in a neuropathic pain model in contrast to attenuation of both by allopregnanolone.\(^{28}\) The investigators suggested that the partial analgesic effects of pregnanolone are caused by suppression of glycine receptors by demonstrating that pregnanolone had a significant analgesic effect only in animals displaying a strychnine-induced allodynia in two types of allodynia models induced by bicuculline and strychnine.\(^{28}\) Moreover, a recent report demonstrated that

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**Fig. 7.** Effects of allopregnanolone sulfate (APAS) on inactivation curves in oocytes expressing Na\(_{1,2}\) (A) (n = 6), Na\(_{1,6}\) (B) (n = 7), Na\(_{1,7}\) (C) (n = 5), or Na\(_{1,8}\) (D) (n = 6) \(\alpha\) subunits with \(\beta_1\) subunits. Currents were elicited by a 50-ms test pulse to −20 mV for Na\(_{1,2}\) and Na\(_{1,6}\), −10 mV for Na\(_{1,7}\), and +10 mV for Na\(_{1,8}\) after 200 ms (500 ms for only Na\(_{1,8}\)) prepulses ranging from −140 mV to 0 mV in 10-mV increments from a \(V_{\text{max}}\) holding potential. Representative \(I_{\text{Na}}\) traces in both the absence and presence of APAS are shown in A-1, B-1, C-1, and D-1. Effects of APAS on inactivation curves (closed circles, control; open circles, neurosteroids; cross, washout) are shown in A-2, B-2, C-2, and D-2. Steady-state inactivation curves were fitted to the Boltzmann equation, and the \(V_{1/2}\) values are shown in table 2. Data are expressed as means ± SEM. Na\(_{\text{v}}\) = voltage-gated sodium channel; Wash = washout.
allopregnanolone shows analgesic effects in rats through suppression of T-type Ca\(^{2+}\) currents and potentiation of GABA\(_A\) currents.\(^{16}\) These previous reports indicate several mechanisms underlying the analgesic effect of allopregnanolone likely exist, as well as potentiation of GABA\(_A\) receptors.

Sodium channel \(\alpha\) subunits expressed in the dorsal root ganglion (Nav1.7, Nav1.8, and Na\(_v\)1.9) are thought to be involved in the pathogenesis of inflammatory and neuropathic pain. A recent study reported that Nav1.2 also plays an important role in pain signaling. It was reported that Na\(_v\)1.2 and Na\(_v\)1.3 predominantly compose functional sodium channel currents within lamina I/II (dorsal horn) neurons, which mediate acute and chronic nociceptive signals from peripheral nociceptors to pain-processing regions in the brain.\(^{37}\) Another recent report showed that mutations in Na\(_v\)1.2 are associated with seizures and pain characterized by headaches and back pain.\(^{38}\) A disubstituted succinamide, a potent sodium channel blocker, was reported to attenuate nociceptive behavior in a rat model of tonic pain and was demonstrated to potently block Na\(_v\)1.2, as well as Na\(_v\)1.7 and Na\(_v\)1.8, with a potency two orders of magnitude higher than anticonvulsant and antiarrhythmic sodium channel blockers currently used to treat neuropathic pain.\(^{39}\) Other investigators demonstrated that four sodium channel blockers, including lidocaine, mexiletine, benzocaine, and ambroxol, which are used clinically to treat pain, suppressed recombinant Na\(_v\)1.2 currents as well as tetrodotoxin-resistant Na\(^+\) channel currents in rat sensory neurons, which comprised mostly Na\(_v\)1.8 currents. The authors suggested that these sodium channel blockers would induce analgesia according...

Fig. 8. Use-dependent blockage of sodium channels on Na\(_v\)1.2 (n = 5), Na\(_v\)1.6 (n = 6), and Na\(_v\)1.7 (n = 5) \(\alpha\) subunits with \(\beta\) subunits by allopregnanolone sulfate (APAS) and pregnanolone sulfate (PAS). Currents were elicited at 10 Hz by a 20-ms depolarizing pulse of −20 mV for Na\(_v\)1.2 and Na\(_v\)1.6 and −10 mV for Na\(_v\)1.7 from a V\(_{1/2}\) holding potential in both the absence and presence of 100 \(\mu\)mol/l of the two compounds; representative INa traces in both the absence and presence of the two compounds (A and C). Peak currents were measured and normalized to the first pulse and plotted against the pulse number (B, the effects of APAS; D, the effects of PAS). Closed circles and open circles represent control and the effect of neurosteroids, respectively. Data were fitted to the monoeponential equation, and values for fractional blockage of the plateau of normalized INa are shown in E and F. Data are expressed as means ± SEM. **P < 0.01 and ***P < 0.001 compared with the control, based on paired t test (two-tailed). Na\(_v\) = voltage-gated sodium channel.
to the amount of sodium channel blocking, including Na\textsubscript{1.2} and Na\textsubscript{1.8}.\textsuperscript{40} These recent reports support that suppression of Na\textsubscript{1.2} function by APAS might be a mechanism underlying the analgesic effects of allopregnanolone.

In conclusion, APAS and PAS have diverse effects on Na\textsubscript{1.2}, Na\textsubscript{1.6}, Na\textsubscript{1.7}, and Na\textsubscript{1.8} \(\alpha\) subunits expressed in Xenopus oocytes, with differences in the effects on sodium channel gating. In particular, only APAS inhibited sodium currents of Na\textsubscript{1.2} at pharmacologically relevant concentrations. These results raise the possibility that suppression of Na\textsubscript{1.2} by APAS may be important for pain relief by allopregnanolone and provide a better understanding of the mechanisms underlying the analgesic effects of allopregnanolone. However, further studies are needed to clarify the relevance of sodium channel inhibition by APAS.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Correspondence

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