Slowing of central conduction in X-linked Charcot-Marie-Tooth neuropathy shown by brain stem auditory evoked responses

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Abstract

Background—The most common form of CMT with slow nerve conduction velocities (CMT type I) is CMT1A, caused by a submicroscopic duplication of a region of DNA on chromosome 17 including the PMP22 gene. This gene is expressed in peripheral nerve but not in the CNS. The second most common form is CMTX, caused by mutations in the connexin32 gene in the X chromosome. Connexin32 is expressed both in brain and in peripheral nerve. These molecular variants are difficult to distinguish clinically.

Methods—Brain stem auditory evoked responses (BAERs) were measured in patients with CMTX and CMT1A.

Results—BAERs showed central conduction slowing in male patients with CMTX which did not overlap the normal range. Patients with CMT1A had a delay in wave I latency but otherwise normal responses. These results are consistent with the pattern of expression of PMP22 in the peripheral portion of the eighth nerve (myelinated by Schwann cells) and of connexin32 in the central portion in the brainstem auditory pathways (myelinated by oligodendrocytes). This is the first evidence for central involvement in CMTX.

Conclusion—BAERs are useful to distinguish CMTX from CMT1A and may assist selection of appropriate patients for connexin32 mutation analysis.

(J Neural Neurosurg Psychiatry 1996;61:43–46)

Keywords: X-linked Charcot-Marie-Tooth neuropathy; brainstem auditory evoked responses

Charcot-Marie-Tooth (CMT) neuropathy is the commonest group of genetic disorders of peripheral nerve with prevalence estimates ranging from one in 3500 to 8000 population.1,3 There are two subgroups of CMT according to nerve conduction velocity. That with slow motor nerve conduction velocities (hereditary motor and sensory neuropathies type I, HMSN I) is more common than CMT type II (HMSN II), an axonal disorder with relatively normal conduction velocities.4,5 Molecular genetic techniques have recently shown that CMT type I is heterogenous and includes disorders caused by abnormalities in Schwann cell myelin proteins.6,7 The most common variety of CMT type I is CMT1A. Some lines of evidence suggest that CMT1A is due to an overdose of the peripheral myelin protein, PMP22, resulting from a duplication of the region of DNA including the PMP22 gene.6,7 CMT1B is rare and is caused by mutations in myelin protein zero (Po).4,7 Both the PMP22 and Po proteins are expressed in compact myelin.

The next most common form of CMT type I after CMT1A, has a locus on the X chromosome (X-linked CMT, CMTX) and has recently been shown to be caused by mutations in the gap junction gene connexin32.9 This may account for 10% to 20% of the total number of type I families.4 No single test can distinguish CMTX from other varieties of CMT type I. Possible CMTX families can be recognised if there is no male to male inheritance of the disease and when affected patients have no chromosome 17 DNA duplication. Additional evidence towards a diagnosis of CMTX is provided if intermediate range motor nerve conduction velocities are found in female CMT carriers.10 This is not always possible as males with CMTX may present as isolated or sporadic cases of CMT when the female carrier mother is asymptomatic. As it is difficult and expensive to confirm the presence of CMTX connexin32 mutations by DNA sequencing, there is a need for further clinical tests to accurately define those with CMTX.

A total of 33 different mutations have now been described in the gap junction protein connexin32 in 39 unrelated families with CMTX.11 The protein is expressed in several tissues12 including glia and neurons in the CNS. Connexin32 is part of a family of gap junction proteins and may have structural and pore properties.13 In peripheral nerve connexin32 is found in Schwann cell membranes in the nodes of Ranvier and in the Schmidt-Lantermann incisures but not in compact myelin.14 Connexin32 transports small molecules up to 1000 Da. Such small molecules may have a nutritional or messenger function. When three CMTX mutations were expressed in a paired oocyte expression system, loss of junctional conductance occurred showing that connexin32 mutations may destroy pore function.14

As connexin32 is expressed in the CNS in both glia and neurons and as some of our patients had mild deafness, we tested hearing and brain stem auditory evoked responses (BAERs) in 10 male patients with CMTX, to determine if auditory pathways are affected in CMTX. Female patients with CMTX were
included as a separate group in this study as the disease is variably expressed in females and they are often only mildly affected. This is due to the effects of lyonisation (variable X chromosome inactivation). The BAERs in patients with CMTX were compared with those in patients with CMT1A and those in normal, unaffected people.

Methods

PATIENT SELECTION

Consecutive patients with CMTX and CMT1A presenting to the Concord Hospital CMT clinic for review were invited to participate in this study. Each was questioned about the presence of deafness. Patients with CMTX or CMT1A were defined by the presence of connexin32 mutations or chromosome 17 duplications respectively.

CMT MUTATIONS

Connexin32 mutations were detected by DNA sequencing of double stranded polymerase chain reaction products as described by Bergoffen et al. The following CMTX mutations were detected: Pro 158 Ala, Val 35 Met, Ser 182 Thr, deletion 110–116, Arg 220 to stop, 1 base pair deletion base 158 giving stop at 195. The CMT1A duplication was determined with probe VAW409R3 (D17S122) and densitometry of autoradiographs and pulse field gel analysis.

RESULTS

SYMPTOMATIC DEAFNESS

One woman with CMT1 (aged 77) and two men with CMTX (aged 70 and 35) had hearing loss on questioning. The 35 year old was slightly deaf in one ear (−25 dB at 6 kHz) and had difficulty hearing in a crowd of people. Audiograms detected mild high frequency sensorineural deafness in these three patients, which was insufficient to prevent BAERs.

BRAND STEM AUDITORY EVOKED RESPONSE STUDIES

Control values for BAERs were obtained from 19 normal subjects ranging in age from 22 to 51 (mean 34.6) years. The 17 patients with CMTX ranged in age from 17 to 77 (mean 42.9) years and the 10 male patients with CMTX were aged 12 to 70 (mean 34.3) years. Eight female patients with CMTX were aged 11 to 78 (mean 37.4) years. Satisfactory BAER waveforms were obtained for all subjects. Waveforms were not attenuated in either patients with CMT1A or those with CMTX.

The mean click threshold for the 19 control subjects was 11.97 (SD 3.95) dB, the 17 patients with CMT1A 15.88 (SD 15.49) dB, the male patients with CMTX 9.25 (SD 7.99) dB, and the female patients with CMTX 14.38 (SD 7.99) dB. The click thresholds for male and female patients with CMTX were not significantly different from controls.

Wave I latencies were significantly longer in patients with CMT1A compared with controls (table) suggesting delayed conduction in the distal eighth nerve. Later BAER wave latencies and interwave latencies beyond wave I for CMT1A were not significantly different from controls (table).

Wave I latencies for patients with CMTX were not significantly different from controls, unlike the patients with CMT1A (table). Later waveforms beyond wave I and I-V interwave latencies were all significantly delayed in the

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**Figure 1** Wave I-V interpeak brain stem auditory evoked response latencies. Interpeak latency (ms) between wave peaks 1 and 1V in the groups shown in figure 1 (normal patients, CMT1A, and CMTX male and female groups); see table for statistics.

**Figure 2** Wave I-V interpeak brain stem auditory evoked response latencies. Interpeak latency (ms) between wave peaks 1 and 1V in the groups shown in figure 1 (normal patients, CMT1A, and CMTX male and female groups); see table for statistics.
patients with CMTX relative to the patients with CMT1A and control subjects (table). The findings in male and female patients with CMTX indicate slowing of conduction in central auditory pathways beyond the distal eighth nerve and indicate that slowing of conduction is seen to the level of the upper pons. The difference was less in female patients with CMTX and values overlapped the normal range. There was no overlap for waves I–V interwave latency between the CMTX male group and the CMT1A and control groups. The longest mean wave I–V interwave latency in the control group was 4.43 ms; the longest CMT1A wave I–V interwave latency was 4.18 ms; and the shortest CMTX wave I–V interwave latency was 4.71 ms.

**Discussion**

Central delay and increased interpeak latencies were found in all male patients with CMTX. Wave I delay was restricted to patients with CMT1A. The results are therefore in accord with the pattern of expression of the PMP22 and connexin32 genes. Further, these results provide some evidence that the wave I generator is situated central to peripheral myelin and that the connexin32 gene is expressed in the proximal acoustic nerve and its central connections. The suggested localisation of the generator sources for the waveforms of the BAER in humans are wave I, distal eighth nerve; wave 2, proximal eighth nerve or cochlear nucleus; wave 3, lower pons; wave 4, mid-pons or upper pons; wave 5, upper pons or inferior colliculus.17

The conduction slowing found in CMTX was in the central auditory pathway, which is sheathed by oligodendrogial myelin. Another test of central conduction—somatosensory evoked responses—could not be reliably obtained due to the peripheral neuropathy obscuring the central responses and were, therefore, not included in the study.

Previous investigators have reported varied BAER abnormalities in patients with CMT type I, some with wave I delay and others with interpeak delays23–25 or either wave I or interpeak delays.23 Patients with both wave I delay and interpeak delay were reported by Garg et al.24 All these studies were performed before it was possible to separate the two common forms of HMSN I—CMT1A and CMTX.

In these earlier studies dominant inheritance was not strictly defined by the presence of male to male inheritance and some multigeneration families without male to male inheritance which could be X-linked families were included. Interpeak BAER delays were probably due to unrecognised cases of CMTX.

We had two patients with both wave I delay and increased interpeak latency indicating that both central and peripheral slowing may occur in CMTX. This is to be expected as considerable slowing of nerve conduction occurs in CMTX but on average is 10 ms faster than in CMT1A.

Our results for CMT1A are similar to those reported in CMT type I by Scaioli et al.19 who found delay in wave peak I consistent with slowing of conduction in the peripheral acoustic nerve. Delay in wave I has also been reported in demyelination in the Guillain–Barré syndrome.25

Raglan et al.22 thought that BAER abnormalities explain hearing loss in HMSN I but our results showed that all our male patients with CMTX had interpeak delays but only two had symptomatic hearing loss and mild high frequency loss on audiograms. One had mild unilateral high frequency losses and the other, like the severely affected patients of Raglan et al.22 was an older patient. This patient and the patient with CMT1A with hearing loss were the two oldest members of the study.

Interpeak delay may be present from birth as even patients as young as 8 years have delays as prominent as older subjects. Therefore, slowing of central conduction may be analogous to the lifelong slowing of nerve conduction in CMT1A26–28 and deafness is an age dependent central phenomenon equivalent to the age dependent decrease in motor action potential amplitude in CMT1A.29

This study is the first evidence of central conduction delay and auditory pathway abnormalities in CMTX and further detailed studies of other central functions are warranted. The delay was unrelated to hearing loss. No central involvement has yet been found in CMT1A. The pathophysiological basis of these findings requires further investigation and suggests a central myelination defect and possible axonal effects in CMTX.

The expert technical assistance of Michele Ingleton and Catherine McKay in carrying out BAER testing and Leonie Yeung and Melissa Gordon for the CMTX and CMT1A mutation analysis is gratefully acknowledged. This work was assisted by grants from the Muscular Dystrophy Association of the USA, the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia, the Australian Brain Foundation (Northwest Golden Bowl Committee), and the Charcot-Marie-Tooth Association of Australia.


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J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry 1996 61: 43-46
doi: 10.1136/jnnp.61.1.43

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