Aquaporin-4 (AQP4) is a mercurial-insensitive, water-selective channel that is expressed in astroglia and basolateral plasma membranes of epithelia in the kidney collecting duct, airways, stomach, and colon. A targeting vector for homologous recombination was constructed using a 7-kb SacI AQP4 genomic fragment in which part of the exon 1 coding sequence was deleted. Analysis of 164 live births from AQP4[+/-] matings showed 41 [+/-], 83 [+/-], and 40 [-/-] genotypes. The [-/-] mice expressed small amounts of a truncated AQP4 transcript and lacked detectable AQP4 protein by immunoblot analysis and immunocytochemistry. Water permeability in an AQP4-enriched brain vesicle fraction in [+/-] mice was high and mercurial insensitive, and was decreased by 14-fold in [-/-] mice. AQP4 deletion did not affect growth or tissue morphology at the light microscopic level. Northern blot analysis showed that tissue-specific expression of AQPs 1, 2, 3, and 5 was not affected by AQP4 deletion. Maximum urine osmolality after a 36-h water deprivation was (in mosM, n = 15) [+/-] 3,342+/−209, [+/-] 3, 225+/−167, and [-/-] 2,616+/−229 (P < 0.025), whereas urine osmolalities before water deprivation did not differ among the genotypes. Rotorod analysis of 35-38-d-old mice revealed no differences in neuromuscular function (performance time in s, n = 8): [+/-] 297+/−25, [+/-] 322+/−28, [-/-] 288+/−37. These results indicate that AQP4 deletion in CD1 mice […]
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Introduction

Several water transporting proteins (aquaporins, AQPs)1 with homology to the major intrinsic protein of lens fiber (MIP, reference 1) have been identified in mammals. AQP1 (original name CHIP28, reference 2) is found in erythrocytes, the kidney proximal tubule, and various epithelia and endothelia. AQP2 (original name WCH-CD, reference 3) is the vasopressin-inducible water channel expressed in the kidney collecting duct. AQP3 (alternate name GLIP, glycerol transporting intrinsic protein) was cloned by several laboratories (4–6), and is expressed at the basolateral membrane of the kidney collecting duct and multiple epithelia (7). AQP4 (original name MIWC, mercurial-insensitive water channel, reference 8) is expressed strongly in the brain and colocalizes with AQP3 in several tissues (see below). AQP5 (9) is expressed in the lung, salivary gland, and eye. Functional studies indicate that the AQPs form water-selective channels, except for AQP3, which also transports glycerol and possibly other small polar solutes. Amino acid sequence analysis indicates several conserved sequences among the AQPs, but with overall amino acid identities of only 25–60%.

Although a considerable body of information exists on the genetics, tissue localization, structure, and function of mammalian AQPs, little is known about their role in normal physiology and disease. Whereas human subjects lacking AQP1 are phenotypically normal (10), mutations in AQP2 cause non–X-linked nephrogenic diabetes insipidus (11). No natural mutations or knockout models for AQPs 3, 4, and 5 have been identified, nor do selective or nontoxic inhibitors exist for any AQP.

The purpose of this study was to generate and characterize a transgenic null mouse lacking AQP4. AQP4 was initially cloned from rat lung (8). Subsequently, an isoform with an extended amino terminus was found in rat brain (12), and homologs from human (13) and mouse (14) were cloned. Immunocytochemistry showed rat AQP4 protein expression at the basolateral membrane of the kidney collecting duct, ependymal cells lining brain ventricles, astroglial cells in the brain and spinal cord, skeletal muscle sarcolemma, and epithelial cells in the stomach, trachea, airways, and colon (7, 15). AQP4 is unique among the mammalian AQPs in that (a) its water permeability is not inhibited by mercurials (because of absence of a cysteine residue at a critical location, reference 16), (b) its single-channel water permeability is three- to fourfold higher than that of the other water channels (17), and (c) it is spatially organized in cell membranes in square orthogonal arrays (18).

1. Abbreviations used in this paper: AQP, aquaporin; ES, embryonic stem; Po, osmotic water permeability.
Based on tissue localization (7, 15) and functional data (19, 20), it was proposed that AQP4 plays a role in neuromuscular function, the urinary concentrating mechanism, airway hydration, and fecal dehydration. The AQP4 null mouse described here was used to test whether AQP4 is important for growth and development, whether AQP4 deletion is associated with tissue-specific upregulation of other AQP5s, and whether AQP4 deletion is associated with defective renal or neuromuscular function.

**Methods**

**Targeting vector construction and embryonic stem (ES) cell screening.** Based on the genomic analysis of mouse AQP4 (14), an AQP4 replacement targeting vector was constructed using a 7-kb genomic SacII fragment containing exons 1–3 and part of exon 4 (Fig. 1). Part of the exon 1 coding sequence (bp 298–381) into a unique NotI site downstream from the PGK-tk cassette and electroporated into CBI-4 ES cells for negative selection. The targeting vector was linearized at a site (Fig. 1). The washed membranes were autoradiographed overnight at room temperature.

**PCR 2.5 day 8 cell morula stage CD1 zygotes, cultured overnight to PC 2.5 day 8 cell morula stage CD1 zygotes, cultured overnight to**

**Figure 1. Targeting strategy for AQP4 gene interruption. The Roman numerals above the wild-type locus indicate AQP4 exons. Primers flanking the left arm were used for PCR screening of ES cell targeting. The probe (2.4 kb) was used for Southern blot analysis. The expected sizes of the EcoRI fragments that hybridize to the 2.4-kb probe (12 and 16 kb) are indicated.**
ice until osmometry. In some experiments, 0.4 µg/kg desmopressin was injected intraperitoneally after obtaining the 36-h urine sample, and a third urine sample was collected at 1–2 h after injection.

**Neuromuscular evaluation.** In addition to standard assessments of animal strength, coordination, and behavior, neuromuscular function was evaluated by performance on an accelerating rotorod (23, 24). According to protocol, mice were trained on the rod for 1 min at rest, 5 min at speed 1, and 1 min at rest. For testing, rod speed was incremented by 1 U every 2 min. Results were expressed as performance time on the rod before falling.

**Results**

Fig. 2A shows a PCR genotype analysis of live mice born from a single mating of a heterozygote [+/-] pair. Wild-type [+/+], heterozygous [+/-], and homozygous [-/-] offspring were identified. Analysis of 164 live births (Table I) showed a genotype distribution that did not differ significantly from the Mendelian 1:2:1 ratio. Fig. 2B shows a representative Southern blot confirmation of genotype. Northern blot analysis indicated strong expression of the full-length 5.5-kb AQP4 transcript in brain from [+/-] mice, with less expression of the 5.5-kb transcript in [+/-] mice, and minimal expression of only a truncated transcript in [-/-] mice (Fig. 2C). Similar results were obtained with mRNA from the lung and kidney. The truncated AQP4 transcript is consistent with the site of gene interruption or may represent alternative splicing and polyadenylation.

**Table I. Genotype Analysis of 164 Offspring from Intercross of AQP4 [+/-] Founders**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genotype</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+/+</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+/-</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-/-</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2D shows no detectable AQP4 protein by immunoblot analysis of brain homogenates from [-/-] mice. There was a consistent reduction (by ~50%) in the amount of AQP4 protein in brain homogenates from [-/-] compared to [+/-] mice. Tissue immunocytochemistry from [+/-] mice revealed
the expected expression pattern of AQP4 in ependymal and astroglial cells in the brain (Fig. 2E), and collecting duct basolateral membrane in the kidney (Fig. 2F) (7). No detectable AQP4 protein was found in tissues from [-/-] mice.

Functional studies of water permeability were carried out in brain vesicles. Dissected cerebra were homogenized, nuclei and mitochondria were pelleted, and light microsomes were fractionated by sucrose density gradient centrifugation. Specific AQP4 expression in brain vesicle fractions from [+/-] mice was determined by quantitative immunoblot analysis and normalized to total protein (Fig. 3, inset). AQP4 protein expression was reduced by ~50% in [-/-] mice compared to [+/-] mice. Fraction 6 (~4% of total membrane protein) had the highest specific expression of AQP4 protein, and was analyzed functionally. No AQP1, AQP2, or AQP3 protein was detected in immunoblots of fraction 6 (not shown). Measurement of vesicle shrinkage in response to an osmotic gradient by stopped-flow light scattering (Fig. 3) indicated a subfraction of vesicles with high P_f (~0.04 cm/s at 10°C); P_f was not inhibited by 0.3 mM HgCl_2 (not shown). Highly water-permeable vesicles were not found in vesicle fractions isolated from the brains of [-/-] mice.

Analysis of growth by animal weight showed no differences among the genotypes (Fig. 4A). Light microscopic examination of hematoxylin/eosin–stained sections of the brain, lung, kidney, trachea, stomach, and skeletal muscle showed no significant differences in morphology and structure in null vs. wild-type mice (not shown).

Urinary concentrating ability was evaluated from urine osmolalities after a 36-h water deprivation (Fig. 4B). No significant differences in urine osmolalities were found in hydrated mice (just before water deprivation period). Serum sodium concentrations (range 151–161 mM) and osmolalities (range 304–335) also did not differ significantly among hydrated mice of [+/-], [+-/-], and [-/-] genotypes (n = 2). However, there was a significant reduction in maximum urine osmolality in the [-/-] mice after a 36-h water deprivation (P < 0.025). Urine...
osmolalities in the 36-h-dehydrated mice did not increase further after desmopressin administration. These results demonstrate a mild urinary concentrating defect in the AQP4 null mice.

Neuromuscular evaluation was carried out by rotord performance, which assesses composite neurological function, coordination, and skeletal muscle strength. After animal training according to established protocols, the times between placement on the rod and falling were measured. No significant differences were found \( (P > 0.4) \) (Fig. 4 C). Neurological evaluation by observation of behavior, and responses to sudden falling, tail lift, and similar maneuvers, showed no overt differences among the genotypes.

The hypothesis was tested that deletion of AQP4 is compensated for by upregulation of other AQPs. Northern blots of tissue mRNAs were probed with coding sequences of AQP1, AQP2, AQP3, and AQP5 (Fig. 4 D). As expected, dehydration produced a marked increase in AQP2 mRNA expression in the kidney. Transcript levels of the AQPs were not significantly different in the \([-/-]\) vs. \([+/-]\) mice. Immunoblot analysis of AQP1 protein in the kidney, brain, lung, and heart (not shown), and of AQP2 and AQP3 protein in the kidney (25) revealed no differences in expression. Immunostaining of the brain with antibodies against AQPs 1-3 also showed no differences in \([+/-]\) and \([-/-]\) mice (not shown).

Discussion

Transgenic null mice deficient in the AQP4 water channel were generated and characterized. The \([-/-]\) knockout mice lacked detectable AQP4 protein. Analysis of 164 live offspring gave the predicted 1:2:1 ratio of \([+/-]\):\([-/-]\):\([+/-]\) genotypes, indicating that there was no pre- or perinatal lethality. Animal growth and organ morphology were not affected by AQP4 deletion. These results suggest that AQP4 protein is not required for the development, survival, or growth of mice, and that phenotype abnormalities, if present, are subtle.

AQP4 is expressed with AQP3 at the basolateral membranes of principal cells in the kidney collecting duct (7), most strongly in the inner medulla (26). AQP4 water channels have thus been proposed to provide a pathway for water exit from principal cells into the hypertonic medullary interstitium. Principal cells also express the vasopressin-regulated water channel AQP2 in intracellular vesicles and at the apical plasma membranes. Defective maximum urinary concentration is predicted if AQP4 is responsible for the transport of a substantial quantity of water. The maximum urinary osmolality induced by water deprivation was decreased significantly in \([-/-]\) mice compared to \([+/-]\) and \([+/-]\) mice. Recent measurements showed an \(~4\)-fold decrease in vasopressin-stimulated water permeability in perfused segments of the inner medullary collecting duct in \([-/-]\) vs. \([+/-]\) mice (25). The absence of a more profound defect in urinary concentrating ability in the \([-/-]\) mice is consistent with the notion that most of the water in the antidiuretic state is extracted osmotically by the cortical and outer medullary segments of the collecting duct. AQP3 may be the major basolateral membrane water channel in these segments.

AQP4 protein is most strongly expressed in astroglial cells in the brain and spinal cord, as well as in ependymal cells lining brain ventricles and in skeletal muscle plasmalemma. It was postulated that AQP4 deletion would cause serious neuromuscular abnormalities, including weakness, defective coordination, and neurological dysfunction. Interestingly, neuromuscular function was grossly normal, and quantitative rotord performance analysis, which assesses neuromuscular function and coordination (23, 24), showed no significant differences among the genotypes. The normal serum osmolality of \([-/-]\) mice provides evidence against a role for AQP4 in osmosensing and osmoregulation. Further analysis will be required to identify possible subtle phenotypes (neuropsychiatric abnormalities, seizure threshold abnormalities), or neuromuscular defects that might develop in older mice.

AQP4 deletion was not associated with a change in the expression levels or patterns of the other mammalian AQPs. The AQP4 gene is located on human chromosome 18 (13), whereas the other aquaporin genes are on chromosomes 7, 9, and 12 (for review see references 27–29). The absence of a major phenotypic abnormality upon AQP4 deletion was an unexpected finding, and suggests that members of the AQP family (other than AQP2, reference 11) may not serve an essential physiological function. The absence of clinically overt abnormalities in AQP1-deficient humans (10) is consistent with this possibility. Phenotype analysis of multiple AQP knockout mice will be useful for further evaluation of AQP physiology.

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References


Aquaporin-4 Knockout Mouse


