Recovery of Salt Taste Responses and PGP 9.5 Immunoreactive Taste Bud Cells during Regeneration of the Mouse Chorda Tympani Nerve

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Introduction

Taste receptor cells are replaced with an average life span of ~10 days in mammals. This turnover is accompanied by continuing synaptic reconnection between newly formed taste cells and gustatory fibers. However, little is known of how sensory information of the fibers is maintained during the synaptic reconnection. Our previous study examined taste responses of regenerated mouse chorda tympani (CT) fibers and revealed that each fiber type classified based on sensitivity to amiloride maintains its characteristics after synapse reformation between regenerated taste axons and receptor cells. That is, we found that there are approximately equal numbers of two types of NaCl-responsive neurons; one type showed strong suppression by amiloride [amiloride-sensitive (AS), N-type fiber], and the other type showed only weak or no suppression by amiloride [amiloride-insensitive (AI), E-type fiber] in intact, regenerated and cross-regenerated taste nerve (Ninomiya, 1998). Our subsequent study investigated the processes of reformation of AI and AS neural systems during the CT regeneration. We postulated and verified whether incoming regenerated CT axons would (i) induce AI and AS properties after synapse formation with identical progenitors; (ii) innervate taste cells randomly followed by elimination of mismatched branches; or (iii) selectively innervate AS or AI taste progenitor cells (Yasumatsu et al., 2003). The results revealed that NaCl responses of the CT recovered from 3 weeks after the nerve crush and most NaCl responsive fibers showed AI (E-type). The number of fibers responding to NaCl after amiloride formed a bimodal distribution from 4 weeks and there were no clusters of fibers with intermediate sensitivity to amiloride (Yasumatsu et al., 2003, figure 6). Moreover, N-type and E-type were clearly different in $K_v$ value and response selectivity (KCI/NaCl response ratios) right from the beginning of their appearance. Thus, these findings from our electrophysiological studies are consistent with the view that regenerating taste axons selectively innervate their corresponding classes of taste progenitor cells. In the present study, to test the possibilities further, we examined PGP9.5, a maker of neurons (Thompson et al., 1983) and sensory paraneurons (Iwanaga et al., 1992), immunoreactive (IR) taste bud cells and the number of taste buds after crushing the mouse CT nerve.

Materials and methods

Experimental manipulation

Subjects were adult male and female C57BL/6N Crj mice (Charles River Japan, Tokyo, Japan), 8–20 weeks of age, ranging in weight from 20 to 32 g. At 8–10 weeks of age, mice were divided into five groups, one intact control group and four nerve-crush groups, respectively 2, 3, 4 and ≥5 weeks after bilateral CT nerves were crushed. Animals were anesthetized with pentobarbital sodium (40–50 mg/kg i.p.), and the bilateral CT nerves were exposed at ~5 mm rostrally apart from their entry to the bulla and repeatedly crushed at a single point with number 5 forceps.

Results and discussion

Fibers and bundles in the containing PGP 9.5 were frequently seen in the whole papilla, including the epithelium and the core of the papilla containing connective tissue. Fibers were seen entering epithelium and taste buds when taste buds were present (Figure 1A,C–E). Some taste bud cells were found to exhibit PGP 9.5-IR. The immunoreactive cells are slender and contain round or invaginated nucleus (Figure 1A). At 2 weeks after crushing the CT, dermal indentations into the epithelium, papillae without taste buds, could be seen (Figure 1B). There was no significant difference in the number of papillae among all groups (data not shown). Nerve fibers often penetrate into epithelium of the papillae (Figure 1B), and some fungiform papillae contain one taste bud primordium or a taste bud containing a taste pore. The existence of a taste pore is often used as a criterion of functional maturation of regenerating and developing taste buds (Segerstad and Hellekant, 1989; Harada et al., 2000). The mean number of PGP-IR cells in a bud was 47.6% of the control PGP-IR cells (Table 1). The CT nerve of this time responded to tactile but not taste stimuli. Cheal et al. (1977) reported that it required about three days for axons to re-establish a taste bud with functional receptors in gerbils. It may be plausible that some molecules involved in taste transduction or synapses did not exist. At 3 weeks, the number of taste buds containing a pore increased to 50% of control. The
number of taste buds with a pore in a papilla was 0.43, and PGP-IR cells in a bud were 76.2% of the control (Figure 1C). In 2–3 weeks, although no AS taste responses were observed in the CT, there were taste bud cells expressing α, β, γ subunits of ENaC (Shigemura et al., unpublished observation), suggesting differentiation of taste cells is independent of synapse formation. These results weaken possibility (i); regenerated CT axons would induce AI and AS properties after synapse formation with identical progenitors. At 4 weeks, the proportion of buds with a pore and the number of PGP-IR cells became larger than that at 3 weeks after nerve crush (Figure 1D). At ≥5 weeks, the number of taste buds with a pore in a papilla and PGP-IR cells increased, suggesting functional recovery of these papillae (Figure 1E). If the number of PGP-IR cells decreased after increment, possibility (ii) might be supported. Although in fact, the number of PGP-IR cells and taste buds kept increasing during the course of regeneration. This observation is consistent with the finding that impulse discharges of both E-type and N-type fibers kept increasing during regeneration (Yasumatsu et al., 2003). Taken together, in the present study, results suggest that (iii) individual axons in each type may increase branches to their matched type of taste progenitor cells with maintaining the selectivity.

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References