The Heritability of Antinociception II: Pharmacogenetic Mediation of Three Over-the-Counter Analgesics in Mice

SONYA G. WILSON, CAMRON D. BRYANT, WILLIAM R. LARIVIERE, MICHAEL S. OLSEN, BELINDA E. GILES, ELISSA J. CHESLER, and JEFFREY S. MOGIL

Department of Psychology and Program in Neuroscience, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, Illinois (S.G.W., C.D.B., W.R.L., M.S.O., E.J.C., J.S.M.); Department of Physiology and Pharmacology, School of Medical Sciences, University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (B.E.G.); and Department of Psychology, McGill University, Montreal, Canada (J.S.M.)

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ABSTRACT

Chromosomal loci containing genes affecting antinociceptive sensitivity to morphine have been identified, but virtually nothing is known about the genetic mediation of sensitivity to over-the-counter analgesics. Such knowledge would be of great clinical interest, as prodigious interindividual variability has been noted in the efficacy of these ubiquitously used drugs. In the present study, we assessed heritability and genetic correlations among three over-the-counter analgesics in mice of 12 inbred mouse strains on the 0.9% acetic acid (i.p.) writhing test. Analgesics included the centrally acting analgesic, acetaminophen (150 mg/kg, s.c.), and the nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), indomethacin (40 mg/kg, s.c.), and ibuprofen (800 mg/kg, s.c.). Significant strain differences in sensitivity to each of the drugs were observed, with narrow-sense heritability estimates ranging from 23 to 45%. Similar strains were sensitive and resistant, respectively, to the two NSAIDs (r_s = 0.64). In contrast, a completely different pattern of sensitivities was observed for acetaminophen, implying genetic dissociation (r_s = 0.29 and 0.02) compared with the NSAIDs. Additional experiments were performed on two strains, C57BL/6 and DBA/2, with extreme sensitivities to acetaminophen. Plasma acetaminophen levels in these strains were not significantly different during the time of antinociception assessment, suggesting the existence of genetic factors affecting acetaminophen pharmacodynamics rather than pharmacokinetics.

Acetaminophen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) are among the most widely used medications in the world by both prescription and over the counter. The physiological basis of their anti-inflammatory, antinociceptive/antihyperalgesic, and antipyretic actions has been debated for some time. The classical explanation that these drugs work via inhibition of peripheral prostaglandin synthesis has been seriously challenged by evidence for central actions (see Yaksh et al., 1998). The discovery of multiple cyclooxygenase enzymes (see Smith and DeWitt, 1996), i.e., the constitutively expressed cyclooxygenase-1 and the inducible cyclooxygenase-2, represented a great advance in the understanding of NSAID action. The recent discovery of cyclooxygenase-3, a splice variant of the cyclooxygenase-1 gene (Chandrasekharan et al., 2002), may explain acetaminophen action. However, it remains unknown whether any cyclooxygenase isoform is necessary and/or sufficient for the antinociceptive actions of over-the-counter analgesics. Evidence from transgenic knockout mice lacking these genes has failed to converge (see Wallace, 1999; Ballou et al., 2000; Guhring et al., 2002), and thus, a new approach may be of value.

Considerable variability in both the antinociceptive and anti-inflammatory responses to individual over-the-counter drugs has been reported (e.g., Huskisson et al., 1976; Scott et al., 1982; Bellamy, 1985; Day et al., 1988; Walker et al., 1994). This variability has rendered it all but impossible to rank such drugs in terms of therapeutic efficacy. In clinical practice, failure to obtain relief with one drug leads to rotation among the common NSAIDs until a satisfactory response is achieved or a switch is made to narcotic analgesics. The cause of this variability is unknown but is likely unrelated to disease variability, as it can be demonstrated in controlled experimental situations (e.g., Walker et al., 1994). Although pharmacokinetic variations among subjects are a favored explanation of over-the-counter antinociceptive vari-
ability, several studies have failed to demonstrate such a relationship (see Walker, 1995). Other proposed explanations of response variability to over-the-counter drugs include sex differences (Walker and Carmody, 1998) and the strength of the placebo effect (Amanzio et al., 2001).

Genetic factors have never been seriously considered as an explanation of variable sensitivity to over-the-counter drugs, although antinociceptive sensitivity to opioids is known to be strongly affected by inherited genetic factors (see Mogil, 1999). The chromosomal locations of genes underlying morphine sensitivity in mice are known (see Mogil, 1999; Bergeson et al., 2001), and pharmacological evidence supports the candidacy of the Oprm (µ-opioid receptor) and Htr1b (serotonin-1B receptor) genes as contributing to variable morphine antinociception in sensitive (DBA/2J) versus resistant (C57BL/6J) strains (see Mogil, 1999). Very little is known about genetic factors underlying variable responses to any other analgesic drug. In a recent study, we demonstrated a surprisingly high genetic correlation between antinociceptive sensitivity to morphine and four neurochemically distinct analgesics: the κ-opioid agonist U50,488, the cannabinoid WIN55,212-2, the nicotinic agonist epibatidine, and the α2-adrenergic agonist clonidine (Wilson et al., 2003). In that study, the same 12 strains were tested for their antinociceptive response to the five drugs, and similar strains were found to be sensitive and resistant, respectively, to each one. This finding implicates the same gene(s) in the mediation of sensitivity to all of the drugs. In addition, for all drugs, a high correlation was obtained between initial nociceptive sensitivity (on the 49°C tail-withdrawal test) and subsequent drug response (Wilson et al., 2003).

Thus, the purposes of the present study were 2-fold. First, we wished to investigate whether sensitivity to over-the-counter antinociception is heritable in the mouse, exhibiting inbred strain mean differences. Second, we wished to investigate whether sensitivity to different over-the-counter drugs would correlate genetically, as we had found previously for other centrally acting drugs (Wilson et al., 2003), or would show genetic dissociation, which might be predicted from the clinical reality described above. Acetaminophen, indomethacin, and lysine-acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin) were chosen for this study, as they are known to differ greatly in their anti-inflammatory efficacy (McCormack and Brune, 1991), cyclooxygenase enzyme selectivity (e.g., Meade et al., 1993), mode of antagonistic action on cyclooxygenase enzymes (see Smith and DeWitt, 1996), and effects on prostaglandin-independent signaling mechanisms (see Tegeder et al., 2001). To these ends, we determined the antinociceptive sensitivity of 11 inbred mouse strains to acetaminophen (150 mg/kg, s.c.), indomethacin (40 mg/kg, s.c.), and lysine-aspirin (800 mg/kg, s.c.) on the 0.9% acetic acid abdominal constriction (writhing) test. For each drug, full dose-response relationships were then examined in extreme-respecting strains. For one drug, acetaminophen, follow-up experiments were performed to establish the generalizability of the strain differences and to investigate whether those differences were due to pharmacodynamic or pharmacokinetic factors.

Materials and Methods

Subjects. Male and female breeders of the outbred strains ND4 Swiss-Webster (Hsd:ND4) or CD-1 (Hsd:ICR) were obtained from Harlan (Indianapolis, IN). Male and female breeders of 11 inbred strains (129P3, A, BALB, C3H/He, C57BL/6, C57BL/10, CBA, DBA/2, and RIHIS, all “J” substrains) were obtained from The Jackson Laboratory (Bar Harbor, ME). All mice used in the studies were bred in an environment-controlled (20 ± 2°C) vivarium under a 12:12-h light/dark cycle (lights on at 07:00). Mice were weaned at 18 to 21 days of age, housed with same-sex littermates in groups of two to five, and given ad lib access to Purina mouse chow (Purina, St. Louis, MO) and water. Both sexes were used in these experiments.

All mice were tested in a quiet room just meters away from the vivarium. Every attempt was made to counterbalance strains across testing schedules, but the vagaries of breeding success prevented true counterbalancing. Nonetheless, all mice were handled equivalently, and all testing was performed on at least two strains simultaneously. Also, to control against day-to-day variability exerting an undue influence on these data, we tested saline-treated mice along with drug-treated mice in every session. Each mouse was used only once and given a single dose of one drug. Sample sizes ranged from n = 5 to 24 per dose per strain (depending on strain availability) in all experiments.

Drugs. Acetaminophen and indomethacin (Sigma-Aldrich, St. Louis, MO) were dissolved in a solution of physiological saline and 1.2-propanediol in a ratio of 87.5:12.5% and titrated to pH 7 with NaOH. Acetaminophen was injected subcutaneously (10 ml/kg) in doses ranging from 0 to 400 mg/kg and indomethacin in doses ranging from 0 to 160 mg/kg. A pilot study performed in both an outbred (ND4 Swiss-Webster) and an inbred (DBA/2) strain confirmed that this vehicle did not produce antinociception on the tests used (data not shown). We were unable, however, to solubilize or adequately suspend aspirin in any vehicle that did not itself produce antinociception. For this reason, we used water-soluble lysine-aspirin in these experiments. We are unaware of any published difference in the pharmacodynamic mechanisms underlying the antinociceptive effects of lysine-aspirin relative to the reference compound. Lysine-aspirin (Aspegic; Synthelabo, France) was dissolved in normal saline and injected s.c. in doses ranging from 0 to 1600 mg/kg.

Pilot experiments using outbred mice revealed linear and dose-dependent antinociception from each drug (data not shown), with the following half-maximal antinociceptive doses (AD50 values; see below) for each drug: acetaminophen (116 mg/kg), indomethacin (41 mg/kg), and lysine-aspirin (460 mg/kg). We chose 150 mg/kg acetaminophen and 40 mg/kg indomethacin as “probe” doses for the inbred strain survey. For lysine-aspirin, a sex difference was observed, such that the AD50 for males was 386 mg/kg and for females was 1255 mg/kg. For this reason, we decided on 800 mg/kg as an appropriate probe dose. It should be noted that this sex difference has been subsequently found to be unreliable, as we were unable to replicate it in ND4 Swiss-Webster mice or any other inbred strain.

Nociceptive Assessment. Mice were assessed for nociceptive sensitivity using the writhing test as described by Koster et al. (1959). A similar model has been shown to be useful in correlating the ED50 values of NSAID antinociception in mice with those in humans (Pong et al., 1985). Although this assay features considerable variability (e.g., a non-negligible percentage of nonresponders), which is particularly problematic for the experiments described herein, it is the only common nociceptive assay in the mouse to feature reliable sensitivity to weak over-the-counter analgesics (see Wilson and Mogil, 2001). Although over-the-counter drugs are reported to be effective in the tonic phase of the formalin test (see Yaksh et al., 1998), we did not observe convincing antinociception at nontoxic doses in pilot studies. We have been able to reduce the percentage of nonresponding mice in the writhing test by using a higher acetic acid concentration, 0.9%, than is commonly used in this assay (0.6%).

All mice were acclimatized to the procedure room for at least 1 h prior to testing. All testing occurred near midphotoperiod (10:00–16:00). Mice were placed on a glass surface within transparent Plexiglas cylinders (29 cm high and 30-cm diameter) and allowed 30 min to habituate to the cylinder. At that point, the mice were weighed, injected with drug or vehicle (10 ml/kg, s.c.), and then placed back into the cylinder. Twenty

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minutes later, 0.9% acetic acid (in saline) was injected i.p. (10 ml/kg). Mice were placed in the cylinders once again and observed continuously for 30 min. Stereotyped writhes (lengthwise contractions of the torso with a concomitant concave arching of the back) were counted over this period in 5-min bins. Four mice were observed and scored at a time. In all cases, the experimenter was kept blind to the drug/vehicle solutions.

In some acetaminophen experiments, the 50°C hot-plate test was used. This assay is a modification of the classic hot-plate test; the lower stimulus intensity is designed to increase the sensitivity of the test to weak analgesics (Ankier, 1974). Mice were placed on a metal surface maintained at 50.0 ± 0.2°C (ITC hot plate analgesia meter model PE34M-HC; ITC, Inc., Woodland Hills, CA). Locomotion of the mouse on the plate was constrained by 20 cm-high Plexiglas walls to an area 14 × 14 cm. Latency to respond to the heat stimulus was measured to the nearest 0.1 s. Mice remained on the plate until they performed either of two behaviors regarded as indicative of nociception: hindpaw lick or hindpaw shake/flutter. Subjects were tested immediately before, and at various time points after, injection of saline or acetaminophen; they remained in their home cages between tests. A cutoff latency of 150 s was imposed to prevent the possibility of tissue damage.

Data Analysis. In writhing experiments, where within-animal baselines cannot be obtained, antinociception was quantified by reference to the saline-treated control group for each strain. Percent antinociception was calculated as [(saline-treated mean writhes – drug-treated writhes)/saline-treated mean writhes] × 100, with the saline-treated mean writhes value being calculated separately for each strain in each experiment. In hot-plate experiments, percent antinociception was quantified with respect to the subject’s own baseline as [(postinjection latency – baseline latency)/150 – baseline latency]) × 100. Half-maximal AD50 values, potency ratios, and associated 95% confidence intervals were calculated from percent antinociception data by the method of Tallarida and Murray (1981).

The presence of strain and sex differences was assessed with ANOVA. In all cases, a criterion α level of 0.05 was employed. A datum from one mouse receiving acetaminophen was removed from the data set after being identified as a statistical outlier (Studentized residual = –3.75).

Because there are no dominance effects in inbred strains, narrow-sense heritability (\(h^2\)) can be estimated from the between-strain variance (\(V_J\)) and the within-strain/error variance (\(V_e\)) using the formula \(h^2 = V_J/(V_J + V_e)\), which is based on the population intraclass correlation coefficient. The variance components were estimated in our sample using PROC VARCOMP (version 8.2; SAS Institute, Inc., Cary, NC). Type I sums of squares estimation (in which observed mean squares are equated to expected mean squares) was assumed to be unity, first-order absorption rate constant (\(K_a\)), and apparent clearance (CL).

Random effects are considered to consist of interindividual variability in each pharmacokinetic parameter, with the remaining variability being termed the residual or unexplained variability within animals (Gomeni et al., 1994). In this study, the interanimal variability in pharmacokinetic parameters was best described using a normal distribution, and the residual variability, which encompasses measurement error and model misspecification, was assumed to be constant across the study population.

P-PHARM generates the population mean of pharmacokinetic parameters and an estimate of the interanimal variability in this parameter (expressed as a percent coefficient of variation). Posterior Bayesian parameter estimates for each animal are also generated. This allows the concentration-time profile in plasma to be determined despite only one sample being available in each animal.

Results

Strain Differences in Baseline Sensitivity on the Writhing Test. As expected, inbred strain differences were observed in the sensitivity to 0.9% acetic acid in vehicle-treated mice. In all three experiments, there was a significant main effect of strain (acetaminophen, \(p < 0.05\); indomethacin, \(p < 0.001\); and lysine-aspirin, \(p < 0.001\)). Estimates of the heritability of writhing test sensitivity calculated from these three data sets range from \(h^2 = 0.22\) to 0.61. Although the three experiments were performed separately and by two different experimenters, significant genetic correlations were observed between responses to 0.9% acetic acid in all cases (\(r_{a} = 0.69 - 0.74\), \(p < 0.001\)). Also, significant genetic correlations (\(r_{a} = 0.73 - 0.90\), \(p < 0.001\)) were observed between vehicle-treated strain means in this experiment and strain means of mice given no s.c. injection and receiving 0.6% acetic acid in a previous study (Mogil et al., 1999), suggesting that neither the vehicle injection nor the increased acetic acid concentration markedly affected responses.
Given the stability of strain sensitivities to this nociceptive model over time and experimenters, to increase the accuracy of the antinociceptive sensitivity estimates, we pooled all vehicle data (n per strain = 13–25). Once pooled, ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of strain (F_{10,194} = 7.94, p < 0.001) corresponding to a heritability estimate of h^2 = 0.34. Neither the main effect of sex nor the sex × strain interaction was significant, although a trend for higher sensitivity in females was observed (p = 0.27).

**Strain Differences in Sensitivity to Acetaminophen.** Strain means of mice treated with vehicle and 150 mg/kg acetaminophen are shown in Fig. 1A; percent antinociception scores calculated from these data are shown in Fig. 1B. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of strain on acetaminophen antinociception (F_{10,100} = 3.02, p < 0.005), corresponding to a heritability estimate of h^2 = 0.24. The main effect of sex and sex × strain interaction were not significant.

A perusal of Fig. 1B suggests that five strains were clear “responders” to acetaminophen (A, AKR, C3H/He, C57BL/6, and C57BL10), having percent antinociception scores ranging from 40 to 70%, whereas the remaining strains were “weak responders” (and nonresponders at this particular dose), with scores ranging from –2.2 to 23%. Thus, to confirm the reliability of these findings, we chose one strain from each category, C57BL/6 (responder) and DBA/2 (weak responder), and compiled full dose-response curves (0–800 mg/kg). As shown in Fig. 1C, the strain difference persists over a wide range of acetaminophen doses, with AD_{50} values differing in these strains by approximately 5-fold.

**Strain Differences in Sensitivity to Indomethacin.** Strain means of mice treated with vehicle and 40 mg/kg indomethacin are shown in Fig. 2A; percent antinociception scores calculated from these data are shown in Fig. 2B. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of strain on acetaminophen antinociception (F_{10,62} = 1.99, p = 0.05), corresponding to a heritability estimate of h^2 = 0.23. The main effect of sex was not significant, but the sex × strain interaction was highly significant (F_{10,62} = 3.02, p < 0.005). This interaction manifested itself as significantly greater indomethacin antinociception in males of two strains relative to females (129P3 and AKR) and significantly greater antinociception in females of two strains relative to males (BALB/c and RIIS). However, caution should be applied, since sex-specific sample sizes were too low to engender confidence in these findings. Overall conclusions regarding genetic correlations were unchanged when male and female indomethacin data were considered separately.

A perusal of Fig. 2B suggests that four strains were clear responders to indomethacin (129P3, C57BL10, C58, and DBA2), having percent antinociception scores ranging from 60 to 75%, whereas the remaining strains were weaker responders. Unlike in the acetaminophen experiment, all strains displayed convincing antinociception at the dose of indomethacin used. To confirm the reliability of these findings, we chose one strain from each category, C58 (responder) and CBA (weak responder), and compiled full dose-response curves (0–160 mg/kg). As shown in Fig. 2C, the strain difference persists over a wide range of indomethacin doses, although calculation of precise AD_{50} values was complicated by incomplete efficacy in both strains.

**Strain Differences in Sensitivity to Lysine-Aspirin.** Strain means of mice treated with vehicle and 500 mg/kg lysine-aspirin are shown in Fig. 3A; percent antinociception scores calculated from these data are shown in Fig. 3B. ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of strain on lysine-aspirin antinociception (F_{10,58} = 5.73, p < 0.001), corresponding to a heritability estimate of h^2 = 0.45. The main effect of sex and sex × strain interaction were not significant, although the main effect of sex approached significance (p = 0.11; males, 59.3 ± 5.7% and females, 50.1 ± 5.2%).

A perusal of Fig. 3B suggests that most strains were clear responders to lysine-aspirin, having percent antinociception scores ranging from 40 to 90%, whereas two strains were weak responders (BALB/c and CBA). To confirm the reliability of these findings, we chose one strain from each category, 129P3 (responder) and BALB/c (weak responder), and compiled full dose-response curves (0–1600 mg/kg). As shown in Fig. 3C, the strain difference persists over a wide range of lysine-aspirin doses, with AD_{50} values differing in these strains by approximately 4-fold.

**Genetic Correlations.** There appeared to be essentially no correlation between strain means of vehicle-treated mice (i.e., baseline sensitivity on the 0.9% writhing test) and antinociceptive sensitivity to acetaminophen, indomethacin, or lysine-aspirin (r_s = –0.12, –0.23, and –0.19, respectively). This lack of genetic correlation was also observed when experiment-specific vehicle means were used instead of combined vehicle means (data not shown).

As shown in Fig. 4, a significant genetic correlation (r_s = 0.64) was obtained between sensitivities to indomethacin and lysine-aspirin, the two NSAIDs tested. However, neither indomethacin nor lysine-aspirin showed a genetic correlation with acetaminophen (r_s = –0.02 and 0.29, respectively), confirming the impression that different strains were sensitive to acetaminophen than to the two NSAIDs. The same conclusion was arrived at when Pearson correlation coefficients were applied (data not shown).

Finally, there appeared to be very little genetic correlation between sensitivity to the three analgesics tested here and five analgesics tested previously (morphine, U50,488, WIN55,212-2, epibatidine, and clonidine) (Wilson et al., 2003), with Spearman correlation coefficients ranging from r_s = –0.34 to 0.50 and averaging r_s = 0.14.

**Sensitivity of C57BL/6 and DBA/2 Mice to Acetaminophen on the 50°C Hot-Plate Test.** To establish the generalizability of these findings to a nociceptive assay other than the writhing test, we tested C57BL/6 and DBA/2 mice for their sensitivity to acetaminophen antinociception on the 50°C hot-plate test. As shown in Fig. 5A, a strain difference in the same direction as in the writhing test was observed. Calculation of precise AD_{50} values was complicated by incomplete efficacy in both strains, especially DBA/2, in which 50% antinociception was never achieved at any dose. Doses higher than 800 mg/kg could not be tested because of lethal toxicity.

**Acetaminophen Pharmacokinetics in C57BL/6 and DBA/2 Mice.** The mean plasma acetaminophen concentration over time following a 400 mg/kg (s.c.) acetaminophen injection in the same two mouse strains is shown in Fig. 5B. The temporal profiles of acetaminophen concentrations in C57BL/6 and DBA/2 are very similar, despite the fact that C57BL/6 mice display robust antinociception on the
hot-plate test at this dose and DBA/2 mice display no antinociception whatsoever (see Fig. 5A). This result was confirmed by the pharmacokinetic modeling analysis, which indicated that the clearance, volume of distribution, and absorption rate constant were not different, with any apparent differences being small (see Table 1).

**Discussion**

To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine the genetic mediation of over-the-counter antinociceptive efficacy, although a large literature exists concerning genetic factors contributing to the toxicity of these compounds (see Fig. 1. Genotype dependence of acetaminophen antinociception in 11 inbred mouse strains. A, total number of writhes in a 30-min period following 0.9% acetic acid injection; mice were pretreated with vehicle (see text) or 150 mg/kg acetaminophen. Raw data shown in A are converted to percent antinociception scores for acetaminophen-treated mice (B). C, dose-response relationships for a sensitive (C57BL/6) and resistant (DBA/2) strain. Bars and symbols in all graphs represent mean (± S.E.M.). *, significantly different from the other strain, $p < 0.05.$
As expected based on our previous experience with multiple analgesics (Wilson et al., 2003), all three compounds tested here displayed mild-to-moderate heritability. This work represents the first step toward identification of genes whose inheritance may predict drug efficacy. Information about the pharmacogenetics of this drug class may lead to more efficient and successful management of a number of pain conditions. These findings may also have more immediate application to the management of postoperative pain in laboratory animals (see Liles and Flecknell, 1992).

The efficacy of over-the-counter analgesics on the mouse writhing test is well known (see Taber, 1974). Given the variable stimulus intensity of different nociceptive assays and the presently demonstrated strain differences in sensi-
tivity, it is difficult to comment on the relation between antinociceptive magnitudes observed herein and those in the literature. We do note, however, that the ratio of acetaminophen/indomethacin/lysine-aspirin AD50 values in ND4 Swiss-Webster mice, for which complete dose-response curves were compiled for all three drugs, was 116:41:460 mg/kg. This ratio is comparable with similar ratios collected previously in mice (Pong et al., 1985; Hunskaar and Hole, 1987). We do not believe that our current demonstration of acetaminophen antinociception on the hot-plate test should be interpreted as contradicting the general notion that over-the-counter drugs are ineffective on acute, thermal assays of nociception. In our hands, only a sensitive strain displayed robust acetaminophen antinociception against a weak thermal stimulus (50°C), at a very high dose (400 mg/kg), and with submaximal efficacy (see Fig. 5).

Fig. 3. Genotype dependence of lysine-aspirin antinociception in 11 inbred mouse strains. A, total number of writhes in a 30-min period following 0.9% acetic acid injection; mice were pretreated with vehicle (see text) or 800 mg/kg lysine-aspirin. Raw data shown in A are converted to percent antinociception scores for lysine-aspirin-treated mice (B). C, dose-response relationships for a sensitive (129P3) and resistant (BALB/c) strain. Bars and symbols in all graphs represent mean (±S.E.M.). *, significantly different from the other strain, p < 0.05.
Genetic Correlations among Over-the-Counter Analgesics. We observed presently a moderate-to-large genetic correlation between sensitivity to lysine-aspirin and indomethacin ($r_s = 0.64$) but no correlation between either of these drugs and acetaminophen ($r_s = 0.02$ and $0.29$, respectively). Since genetic correlation implies overlapping physiological mediation (see Mogil, 2000), it is worth a brief mention of the known commonalities and dissociations among these drugs. Acetaminophen has always been the outlier among over-the-counter drugs, displaying very weak anti-inflammatory effects (at least peripherally) (McCormack and Brune, 1991; but see Honore et al., 1995). It has therefore been argued that acetaminophen, unlike NSAIDs, may work in the central nervous system (e.g., Pilettta et al., 1991). However, evidence for central actions of NSAIDs too is now overwhelming (see Yaksh et al., 1998), with dose-dependent suppression of pain behavior in animal models produced by intrathecal or intracerebroventricular injections of a number of NSAIDs at doses far lower than those required for peripheral effects. There exist many published dissociations between aspirin and indomethacin action as well. Although aspirin inhibits inducible nitric oxide synthase, transcription factor NF-$\kappa$B, and Erk protein kinase in murine cell lines (independent of cyclooxygenase-2 inhibition), indomethacin (and acetaminophen) do not (see Tegeder et al., 2001). Aspirin can block neurogenic inflammation when injected centrally, whereas indomethacin and steroid anti-inflammatory drugs cannot (Catania et al., 1991). Even the mode of cyclooxygenase antagonism differs between aspirin, a noncompetitive antagonist producing irreversible acetylation of the cyclooxygenase site, and indomethacin, which causes a conformational change (see Smith and DeWitt, 1996).

Despite these differences, the current finding of genetic correlation between lysine-aspirin and indomethacin directly predicts the existence of genes commonly (pleiotropically) affecting the two NSAIDs and the existence of distinct genes affecting acetaminophen antinociception. One obvious possibility is that NSAID antinociception may be affected by al-
allelic variation in *Ptgs2*, the murine gene encoding cyclooxygenase-2, whereas acetylamphen oxide antinociception is affected by allelic variation in *Ptgs1*, the gene encoding cyclooxygenase-1 and, more importantly for acetylamphen, the cyclooxygenase-3 splice variant (Chandrasekharan et al., 2002). This possibility is being investigated at the present time using quantitative trait locus analysis (see Mogil, 1999), but our recent experience cautions against the assumption that antinociceptive variation need be explained by allelic variation at the gene coding for the molecular binding site of the drug. As mentioned above, surprisingly high genetic correlations were observed for antinociceptive sensitivity to five neurochemically distinct compounds (Wilson et al., 2003).

Such a finding all but eliminates the possibility that genetic variability in the level or functionality of the receptor of each drug was responsible for variability in antinociceptive response. Indeed, variability in antinociceptive efficacy may derive from allelic variation at any gene producing a protein involved in 1) the neural circuit mediating drug antinociception, from binding site to effector site, 2) signal transduction mechanisms within any neuron in that circuit, and/or 3) pharmacokinetic mechanisms impacting drug concentration at relevant binding sites. With regard to the latter, it appears that at least for acetylamphen, the relevant genes are playing a pharmacodynamic role, since strain-dependent hot-plate antinociception was not accompanied by evidence of strain-dependent pharmacokinetic parameters (see Table 1) or plasma acetylamphen concentration (see Fig. 5).

**Geneic Correlations between Writhing Test Sensitivity and Over-the-Counter Drug Antinociception.** Our previous investigation into genetic mediation of antinoiceptive revealed, in addition to genetic correlation among disparate analoges, that antinociceptive sensitivity was correlated with initial nociceptive sensitivity (Wilson et al., 2003). This phenomenon was not observed presently, with genetic correlations between writhing test sensitivity and acetylamphen, indomethacin, and lysine-aspirin antinociception of $r_g = -0.12$, $-0.23$, and $-0.19$, respectively. It is difficult to speculate on whether the contradictory findings are secondary to the nociceptive assays being used (tail-withdrawal and formalin tests versus writhing test) or the different drug classes being tested. It is also the case that genetic correlations between the drugs tested in our previous study (morphine, U50,488, WIN55,212-2, epibatidine, and clonidine) and those tested presently were almost all very low ($r_g = -0.34$ to $-0.50$; mean $r_g = 0.12$; all corrected for sign). This low correlation may indicate genetic independence of over-the-counter analoges from those known to activate descending pain-modulatory systems, but the lack of correlation may also be explained by the different nociceptive assays used in each case (e.g., Elmer et al., 1997).

**Conclusions**

The finding of genotype-dependent sensitivity to over-the-counter drug antinociception represents the first step in the identification of genes associated with such variability. This, in turn, may shed new light on the mechanism of action of these important therapeutics. Given the known spinal and supraspinal actions of over-the-counter drugs (see Yaksh et al., 1998) and their myriad cyclooxygenase-independent actions and interactions with central opioidergic and serotonergic circuitry (e.g., Bjorkman, 1995), it is far from clear that the antinociceptive effects of this drug class can be adequately explained by cyclooxygenase inhibition alone. Thus, the fact that the cyclooxygenase genes are now well known does not preclude the important involvement of any number of additional genes. For example, an intriguing new hypothesis (Guhring et al., 2002) is that NSAIDs, by virtue of blocking cyclooxygenase, may liberate arachidonic acid to be transformed by an unknown pathway to anandamide, which has been shown to produce antinociception when released endogenously (Walker et al., 1999).

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**References**


Address correspondence to: Dr. Jeffrey S. Mogil, Dept. of Psychology, McGill University, 1205 Dr. Penfield Ave., Montreal, QC H3A 1B1, Canada.

E-mail: jeffrey.mogil@mcgill.ca


