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**The Neuropeptide Y Y<sub>2</sub> receptor is co-expressed with Nppb in  
primary afferent neurons and Y<sub>2</sub> activation reduces histaminergic  
and IL-31-induced itch**

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Natriuretic polypeptide b, IL31 Interleukin-31, 5HT Serotonin, Grpr Gastrin releasing peptide receptor, Bhlhb5 Class B basic helix-loop-helix protein 5, Sst Somatostatin

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## Abstract

Itch stimuli are detected by specialized primary afferents, which convey the signal to the spinal cord, but how itch transmission is regulated is still incompletely known. Here, we investigated the roles of the neuropeptide Y (NPY)/Y<sub>2</sub> receptor system on scratch behavior. The inhibitory Y<sub>2</sub> receptor is expressed on mouse primary afferents and intrathecal administration of the Y<sub>2</sub> agonist peptide YY (PYY)<sub>3-36</sub> reduced scratch episode frequency and duration induced by compound 48/80, an effect that could be reversed by intrathecal pre-administration of the Y<sub>2</sub> antagonist BIIE0246. Also, scratch episode duration induced by histamine could be reduced by PYY<sub>3-36</sub>. In contrast, scratch behavior induced by  $\alpha$ -methyl-5HT, SLIGRL, chloroquine, topical dust mite extract, or mechanical itch induced by von Frey filaments was unaffected by stimulation of Y<sub>2</sub>. Primary afferent neurons expressing the *Npy2r* gene were found to co-express itch-associated markers such as natriuretic peptide precursor b, oncostatin M receptor and interleukin (IL) 31 receptor A. Accordingly, intrathecal PYY<sub>3-36</sub> reduced the scratch behavior induced by IL-31. Our findings imply that the NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system reduces histaminergic and IL-31-associated itch through presynaptic inhibition of a subpopulation of itch-associated primary afferents.

## Significance statement

The spinal neuropeptide Y system dampens scratching behavior induced by histaminergic compounds and interleukin 31, a cytokine involved in atopic dermatitis, through interactions with the Y<sub>2</sub> receptor. The Y<sub>2</sub> receptor is expressed by primary afferent neurons that are rich in itch-associated neurotransmitters and receptors such as somatostatin, natriuretic peptide precursor b and interleukin 31 receptors.

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## Introduction

More than 350 years ago, itch was defined as an “unpleasant sensation that elicits the desire or reflex to scratch” by the German physician Samuel Hafenreffer (Ikoma et al., 2006) and whereas acute itch serves a purpose by initiating scratching that will remove irritants that can cause harm, persistent itch severely affects the quality of life. Itch-inducing, or pruritogenic substances are detected by specific receptors expressed by primary afferent neurons (Liu et al., 2009; Schmelz et al., 1997).

Neurotransmitters, such as natriuretic polypeptide b (Nppb) transmits the signal further to the dorsal horn of the spinal cord (Mishra and Hoon 2013), where the gastrin releasing peptide receptor (Grpr) system is subsequently activated (Sun et al., 2009; Aresh et al., 2017), relaying the signal further to projection neurons, which convey the information to the brain (Mu et al., 2017).

The neurotransmitter neuropeptide Y (NPY) is expressed by spinal GABAergic interneurons located in lamina I-IV of the dorsal horn (Bourane et al., 2015; Rowan et al., 1993). Under normal conditions, expression of *Npy* mRNA is below the detection limit in dorsal root ganglia neurons (Usoskin et al., 2015), but becomes significantly up-regulated after peripheral nerve injury (Wakisaka et al., 1991). Spinal NPY interneurons are activated by nociceptive input (Polgar et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2010) and NPY binds to the NPY receptor family, where the  $Y_1$  receptor is expressed on excitatory somatostatin-expressing interneurons in the spinal cord and in a few primary afferent neurons (Zhang et al., 1999). Activation of the  $Y_1$  receptor results in reduced histaminergic and mechanical itch transmission (Gao et al., 2018) and conversely ablation or silencing of NPY interneurons results in increased itch and

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alloknesis upon mechanical stimuli (Bourane et al., 2015), indicating that the NPY/Y<sub>1</sub> system regulates both mechanical and histaminergic itch.

In the spinal neuronal network, the Y<sub>2</sub> receptor is found in central terminals of primary afferent neurons (Brumovsky et al., 2005; Usoskin et al., 2015; Li et al., 2016; Zeisel et al., 2018) and dorsal rhizotomy completely abolish Y<sub>2</sub> immunoreactivity in the spinal cord (Brumovsky et al., 2005), however, a recent analysis has also shown weak *Npy2r* mRNA expression in some excitatory (Glut10, Glut11) and inhibitory (Gaba7, Gaba10, Gaba11) neuronal subtypes of dorsal horn interneurons (Häring et al., 2018). Activation of Y<sub>2</sub> has been shown to have a protective role against the development and maintenance of peripheral neuropathic pain (Solway et al., 2011). However, the role of the Y<sub>2</sub> receptor in itch is unknown. Y<sub>2</sub> couples via the inhibitory G protein subunits  $\alpha_1$  and  $\alpha_o$  (Beck-Sickinger et al., 2018) and activation of the receptor decreases the firing frequency by activating G-protein-linked inwardly rectifying potassium (GIRK) conductances and depressing calcium currents in Y<sub>2</sub>-expressing neurons (Acuna-Goycolea et al., 2005; Ghamari-Langroudi et al., 2005). As Y<sub>2</sub> is expressed presynaptically on primary afferent neurons, we hypothesized that selective activation of Y<sub>2</sub> could have a dampening effect on itch transmission. In the current analysis we used a pharmacological and bioinformatical approach to address the role of Y<sub>2</sub> in itch.

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## Materials and methods

### *Animals*

Animal procedures were approved by the local ethical committee in Uppsala (Uppsala djurförsöksetiska nämnd) and followed the Directive 2010/63/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, The Swedish Animal Welfare Act (Djurskyddslagen: SFS 1988:534), The Swedish Animal Welfare Ordinance (Djurskyddsförordningen: SFS 1988:539), and the provisions regarding the use of animals for scientific purposes: DFS 2004:15 and SJVFS 2012:26. All behavioral analyses were performed in a controlled environment at 20 to 24°C, 45% to 65% humidity, and during the light 12-hour day/night cycle.

### *Itch behavior - general*

Adult male C57BL6 mice (>7 weeks old) were placed and acclimated for 5-10 minutes in a transparent plastic chamber (820 cm<sup>3</sup>) with bedding before they were sedated using isoflurane and injected intrathecally with Y<sub>2</sub>-related substances. The chemical-induced itch behavior (described below) was recorded for 60 minutes with a digital camera, and mechanical itch (described below) was also recorded using a video camera while the experimenter stimulated the mice mechanically using 0.07 g von Frey filaments. One scratch episode was defined as lifting up either hind paw followed by scratching towards the pruritogen-injected or mechanically stimulated area from the time point when the paw was lifted until it was placed back on the ground. Scratch episode frequency was defined as number of scratch episodes during the defined time span, scratch episode duration was defined as total time spent

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scratching during the defined time span and the duration/frequency ratio provides the mean length of a scratch episode. The itch behavior was scored manually using the software AniTracker v1.0 ([www.rsutils.com/downloads.html](http://www.rsutils.com/downloads.html)).

### *Chemical itch*

Adult male C57BL6 mice (>7 weeks old) were sedated using isoflurane, after which the mice were slowly injected intrathecally (L5-L6) with 5  $\mu$ L of the agonist PYY<sub>3-36</sub> 2 nM (8.1 pg/mL) or 200 pM (0.81 pg/mL), selective for Y<sub>2</sub> (Beck-Sickinger et al., 2018) (Bachem, Bubendorf, Switzerland), or the Y<sub>2</sub> antagonist BIIIE0246 ((2S)-5-(diaminomethylideneamino)-N-[2-[3,5-dioxo-1,2-di(phenyl)-1,2,4-triazolidin-4-yl]ethyl]-2-[[2-[1-[2-oxo-2-[4-(6-oxo-5,11-dihydrobenzo[c][2]benzazepin-11-yl)piperazin-1-yl]ethyl]cyclopentyl]acetyl]amino]pentanamide) (Beck-Sickinger et al., 2018) 1  $\mu$ M (0.9  $\mu$ g/mL, Tocris Bioscience, Bristol, UK) or saline (9 mg/mL, Apoteket, Sweden) using a 25  $\mu$ L Hamilton syringe. After injection, mice were acclimated for 10 min in their respective home cage for recovery before given an 50  $\mu$ L intradermal injection in the nape of the neck of; compound 48/80 (mast cell degranulator, n-methyl 4-methoxyphenethylamine) (13 mM, 100  $\mu$ g/50  $\mu$ L, Sigma, St. Louis, US), histamine (18 mM, 100  $\mu$ g/50  $\mu$ L), Sigma, St. Louis, US),  $\alpha$ -methyl serotonin (3.2 mM, 30  $\mu$ g/50  $\mu$ L), Sigma, St. Louis, US), SLIGRL (3 mM, 100  $\mu$ g/50  $\mu$ L), Bachem, Bubendorf, Switzerland), IL-31 (12  $\mu$ M, 9.5 ng/50  $\mu$ L, PeproTech, Sweden (US)) or chloroquine (CQ) (10 mM, 160  $\mu$ g/50  $\mu$ L), Sigma, St. Louis, US) and then transferred to a transparent cage supplied with bedding. Scratching behavior was recorded for 60 minutes using a digital camera. The investigators were not present in the room during the recordings and were blinded to the intrathecal treatment given. The itch behavior was later scored manually using the software

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AniTracker v1.0 ([www.rsutils.com/downloads.html](http://www.rsutils.com/downloads.html)) and the results were displayed as the mean  $\pm$  SEM.

To evaluate the selectivity of 200 pM PYY<sub>3-36</sub> for Y<sub>2</sub>, 1  $\mu$ M (0.9  $\mu$ g/mL) of the Y<sub>2</sub> selective antagonist BIIE0246 (Beck-Sickinger et al., 2018), Tocris Bioscience, Bristol, UK) or saline (control) was given intrathecally 10 min before PYY<sub>3-36</sub> or saline using a 25  $\mu$ L Hamilton syringe.

#### *Atopic dermatitis-like itch*

Adult female Nc/Nga mice (9-10 weeks, Charles River, Japan) were shaved dorsally and 200 mg depilatory cream (Veet hair removal cream, Apotea, Sweden) was applied on the shaved area and removed after two minutes incubation. Atopic dermatitis (AD)-like symptoms were initially induced by application of 100 mg Biostir® dust mite extract (Biostir Inc., Osaka, Japan) on the dorsal skin and the back sides of the ears, after which the mice were returned to their home cage. From the second dust mite treatment onwards, the mice were subjected to the following treatment twice a week for a maximum of five weeks: if hair had re-grown it was removed as described above. Afterwards, 150  $\mu$ L 4% sodium dodecyl sulfate (dissolved in saline or PBS, was used to enable the mite extract to reach stratum corneum) was applied to the hairless surface after which the surface was dried with a hair dryer (cold mode). The animal was then returned to the home cage for 2-3 hours, after which 100 mg Biostir® AD ointment was applied to the surface. During the dust mite treatment, the mice developed atopic dermatitis-like symptoms and when the severity of the symptoms reached grade 7-8, according to grading system/photos from the supplier (Biostir), the mice were enrolled in the behavior study. Basal level of itch



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behavior was recorded after mimicking the intrathecal injection procedure but without performing the injection i.e. the mice were handled under anesthesia for 4-5 min and then recovered for 10 minutes in home cage. On the second day, and at the same time of the day as the baseline recording, mice were given an intrathecal injection of either 5  $\mu$ L saline or 2 nM PYY<sub>3-36</sub> under anesthesia induced by 3-4% isoflurane. When the mice completely recovered from sedation, they were transferred to a transparent cage supplied with bedding. Scratching behavior was recorded for 60 minutes using a digital camera. The itch behavior was later scored manually using the software AniTracker v1.0 ([www.rsutils.com/downloads.html](http://www.rsutils.com/downloads.html)) and the results were displayed as the mean  $\pm$  SEM. Observers were blinded to the intrathecal treatment given when they performed video analyses.

### *Mechanical itch*

Adult male C57BL6 mice (>7 weeks) were sedated using 3-4% isoflurane and slowly injected intrathecally (L5-L6) with 5  $\mu$ L PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (2 nM) or saline (9 mg/mL) using a 25  $\mu$ L Hamilton syringe. Mice were then acclimated for 10 min in a transparent cage with bedding and recorded with a digital camera. After acclimation, 0.07 g von Frey filaments (AgnThos, Lidingö, Sweden) were applied to the nape of neck. A behavior response upon von Frey stimuli would result in either a shake of the fur and was recorded as one shake episode; or a scratch by either hind paw and was recorded as a scratch episode. Each mouse was given three repeats of five consecutive mechanical stimuli at the frequency of 1/s by a 0.07 g von Frey filament. The mechanical itch behavior was reported as mean number of scratch/shake episodes per repeat (per five von Frey stimuli) (frequency), mean time spent scratching/shaking per repeat (per five von Frey stimuli) (duration) and mean length of shake or scratch episodes

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(duration/frequency). The results were displayed as the mean  $\pm$  SEM. A shaking behavior of the fur has been shown to relate well to pruritogen-induced scratching (Jinks and Carstens 2002).

### *Statistical analysis*

Gaussian distribution was tested using D'Agostino & Pearson normality test (GraphPad Prism, CA). Unpaired t-test (GraphPad Prism, CA) was used for the data sets (comparison between two different treatments) that passed the normality test and Mann-Whitney test (GraphPad Prism, CA) was used for the other datasets.

Comparison between three different treatments was performed using a One-way ANOVA with Bonferroni posttest (GraphPad Prism, CA). As the control level of scratch behavior induced by 48/80 differed between experiments, we only compare data within each experiment. The differences observed may be related to variances between different batches of C57BL6 mice and/or batch differences in the prepared solutions of compound 48/80.

### *Single-cell computational analysis of Npy2r-expressing DRG neurons*

Single-cell gene expression data from DRG neurons was accessed from Li et al. (GEO accession: GSE63576), Usoskin et al. (GSE59739) and Zeisel et al. (mousebrain.org, l6\_r3\_spinal\_cord\_neurons.loom) (Zeisel et al., 2018; Usoskin et al., 2015; Li et al., 2016). Total reads for each cell were normalized to the median read count of all cells, and the counts were further logarithmized (SCANPY, log1p) (Wolf et al., 2018). Top 5000 highly variable genes (HVG) were detected for all datasets (SCANPY, filter\_gene\_dispersion) (Zheng et al., 2017), and the shared genes

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were used to transform and merge the datasets scaled to unit variance and zero mean (SCANPY, scale) using mutual nearest neighbor transformation (SCANPY, mnn\_correct) (Haghverdi et al., 2018). Both the Häring and Zeisel datasets had annotated cell types, which have been summarized by Gatto et al. (Gatto et al., 2019) and the celltypes in these two datasets were mapped according to the functional subtypes of Gatto. A Linear support vector classification algorithm (scikit-learn, LinearSVC) (Pedregosa et al., 2011) was trained to predict Gatto cell types using Usoskin and Zeisel gene expression as predictor variables and Gatto cell types as target labels. Cell type labels were thereafter predicted for Li cells. Cell types labels were then mapped back to a merged and unscaled dataset containing all genes for expression analysis. A dotplot was constructed grouped by the Gatto cell types (SCANPY, dotplot).

Differentially expressed genes were calculated for the Itch Nppb population against the remaining cells of the dataset, with overestimated variance t-test as scoring values (SCANPY, rank\_genes\_groups). Full python code can be found at <https://github.com/JonETJakobsson/Npy2r-neurons-in-DRG>

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## Results

### *The Y<sub>2</sub> receptor regulates histaminergic and IL-31-induced itch*

To investigate the role of the NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system in chemical itch, mice were injected intrathecally with the selective Y<sub>2</sub> agonist PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (Beck-Sickinger et al., 2018) or saline followed by an intradermal injection of a pruritogen in the nape of the neck. Intrathecal injection of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (200 pM) had no effect on histamine-induced scratch episode duration or frequency ( $P>0.05$ ), while injection with a higher concentration of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (2 nM) attenuated the duration ( $P<0.05$ ) (Fig. 1A), but not the frequency of histamine-induced scratch episodes ( $P>0.05$ ), although a trend towards fewer scratch episodes was observed (Fig. 1B). The mean lengths of scratch episodes did not differ between PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (200 pM, 2 nM) and saline-treated mice ( $P>0.05$ ) (Fig. 1C). Hence, activation of Y<sub>2</sub> dampens histamine-induced itch by reducing the total time spent scratching.

Compound 48/80 is a mast cell degranulator, which mainly induces release of histamine, prostaglandins, cytokines and mast cell proteases (Moon et al., 2014), which results in itch (Liu et al., 2016). Intrathecal injection of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (200 pM) reduced the duration of compound 48/80-induced scratch episodes ( $P<0.01$ ), while the frequency of scratch episodes was similar as saline-treated mice ( $P>0.05$ ) (Fig. 1A-B). However, when mice were intrathecally injected with the higher concentration of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (2 nM), both the duration and the frequency of 48/80-induced scratch episodes were significantly reduced ( $P<0.001$ ,  $P<0.01$ ) (Fig. 1A-B). The mean length of scratch episodes was not changed, neither in 200 pM ( $P>0.05$ ) nor in 2 nM PYY<sub>3-36</sub>-treated mice ( $P>0.05$ ) compared to saline-treated mice (Fig. 1C), showing that Y<sub>2</sub> activation regulates 48/80-induced scratching behavior by reducing both the number

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of scratch episodes (the perception/initiation of itch) and the total time spent scratching.

To verify the specificity of the  $Y_2$  agonist PYY<sub>3-36</sub> and its effect on histaminergic itch, the selective  $Y_2$  antagonist BIIE0246 (1  $\mu$ M) (Beck-Sickinger et al., 2018) was intrathecally injected 10 min before injection of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (200 pM). Both the duration and the frequency were reversed to a similar level as saline-treated mice upon intradermal injection of compound 48/80 ( $P=0.77$ ,  $P=0.16$ ), verifying the selectivity of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> for the  $Y_2$  receptor (Fig. 2A-C). When only BIIE0246 was intrathecally injected prior to compound 48/80 administration, the mean length of scratch episodes (duration/ frequency) was significantly increased compared to saline-treated mice ( $P=0.0015$ ), showing that the  $Y_2$  antagonist BIIE0246 increased the scratch response, most probably by blocking the binding of endogenous NPY (Fig. 2C).

To evaluate if the NPY/ $Y_2$  system also regulates non-histaminergic scratch behavior, each of the non-histaminergic pruritogens  $\alpha$ -methyl-5HT (30  $\mu$ g), SLIGRL (100  $\mu$ g) and the anti-malaria drug chloroquine (160  $\mu$ g) were injected intradermally after an intrathecal injection of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (2 nM) or saline. There was no difference in scratch episode duration ( $P>0.05$ ,  $P=0.71$ ,  $P=0.26$ ) (Fig. 3A), number of scratch episodes ( $P>0.05$ ,  $P=0.26$ ,  $P=0.32$ ) (Fig. 3B) or the mean length of scratch episodes ( $P>0.05$ ,  $P=0.71$ ,  $P=0.26$ ) (Fig. 3C) between PYY<sub>3-36</sub> and saline after injection of each of the non-histaminergic pruritogens.

Interleukin (IL)-31 has been implicated in the pathophysiology of atopic dermatitis (Dillon et al., 2004; Nobbe et al., 2012; Kato et al., 2014) and to test the role of the

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NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system in the regulation of IL-31-associated itch, mice were given an intradermal injection of IL-31 (12 μM) 10 min after an intrathecal injection of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (2 nM) or saline. Compared to saline-treated mice, both scratch duration and mean length of scratch episodes were decreased in mice pretreated with PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (P=0.0279 and P=0.0035, respectively), whereas scratch episode frequency was unaltered (Fig. 4A-C), showing that Y<sub>2</sub> regulates IL-31-induced itch by reducing the total time spent scratching and by shortening the length of the scratch episodes.

To evaluate the involvement of the NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system in more persistent forms of itch, a translational model for atopic dermatitis was established using the Nc/Nga strain. Intrathecal injection of vehicle did not affect scratch episode duration (P=0.61), number of scratch episodes (P=0.93) or mean length of scratch episodes (P=0.22), compared to the scratch behavior prior to the injection (Fig. 4A-C). Similarly, intrathecal injection of the Y<sub>2</sub> receptor agonist PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (2 nM) did not affect scratch episode duration (P=0.14), number of scratch episodes (P=0.33), mean length of scratch episodes (P=0.07) (Fig. 4A-C), compared to the scratch behavior prior to the injection, although a trend towards decreased scratch behavior was observed. Thus, although the NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system can reduce scratching induced by IL-31, an interleukin involved in atopic dermatitis, the NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system did not have a clear effect in reducing scratch behavior in a translational model of atopy. Atopic dermatitis is also associated with IL-4, IL-5 and IL-13 (Oetjen and Kim 2018), which may reflected the different treatment outcomes.

*The Y<sub>2</sub> receptor does not regulate acute mechanical itch behavior*

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To investigate the role of  $Y_2$  in mechanical itch, mice were given an intrathecal injection of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (2 nM) or saline and their acute behavioral response, following application of a 0.07 g von Frey filament to the nape of the neck, was monitored. There was no difference in shake duration ( $P=1.0$ ) (Fig. 5A), shake frequency ( $P=0.88$ ) (Fig. 5B) or mean length of shake episode ( $P=0.67$ ) (Fig. 5C) between PYY<sub>3-36</sub> and saline injected mice, showing that NPY/ $Y_2$  is not involved in acute mechanical itch transmission. Scratch episode duration, frequency and mean length of scratch episode were also monitored, but few scratch responses was observed and no differences was observed between the treatments (Supplemental Figure 1).

#### *Npy2r* primary afferent neurons co-express itch-associated genes

To relate the observed itch phenotype to gene expression patterns among *Npy2r*-expressing dorsal root ganglion (DRG) neurons, the DRG single-cell gene expression datasets from Usoskin (Usoskin et al., 2015), Zeisel (Zeisel et al., 2018) and Li (Li et al., 2016) were merged and aligned (Fig. 6A), resulting in a combined set of 2406 DRG neurons (622 from Usoskin, 1580 from Zeisel and 204 from Li). The hypothesized cell function labels assigned by Gatto were mapped to Usoskin and Zeisel cells. Cell type labels for neurons in Li dataset were predicted and assigned Gatto cell type labels (Fig. 6B). All cell types had cells from each dataset, with the exception of Cool cells, which were almost exclusively from Zeisel dataset (Fig. 6C). Ninety percent of all Itch Nppb neurons, 38% of all A $\delta$ -nociceptors and 17% of all C-nociceptors expressed *Npy2r* (Fig. 6D). The other cell types had less than 10% expression of *Npy2r*. As the Itch Nppb population had by far the highest *Npy2r* expression, further analysis was focused on this population.

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The top differentially expressed genes for the Itch Nppb population were found to include several itch-related genes, such as the neuropeptides *Nppb* and somatostatin (*Sst*), the Interleukin 31 receptors *Il31ra* and *Osmr*, the leukotriene receptor *Cystrl2*, the serotonin receptor *Htr1f*, and the NPY receptor *Npy2r* (Mishra and Hoon 2013; Nobbe et al., 2012; Dillon et al., 2004; Stantcheva et al., 2016; Angelova-Fischer and Tsankov 2005) ( Table 1) (Fig. 6D). Furthermore, the Itch Nppb population showed expression of other genes related to itch transmission, such as histaminergic signaling (histamine receptor (*Hrh1*)(low), phospholipase C beta 3 (*Plcb3*), and transient receptor potential cation channel subfamily V member 1 (*Trpv1*)), and the SLIGR/SLIGRL receptor PAR2 (*F2rl1*)(low) (Nystedt et al., 1995; Shimada et al., 2006; Liu et al., 2011). Receptors not present or absent in the Itch Nppb population were serotonin receptors (*Htr2a* and *Htr7*), histamine receptors (*Hrh3* and *Hrh4*), BAM8-22/SLIGRL receptor (*Mrgprx1* (also known as *Mrgprc11*)) (Liu et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2011) and the chloroquine receptor *Mrgpra3* (Liu et al., 2009)(Fig. 6D). Thus, the Itch Nppb population of primary afferents displayed enriched expression of several genes involved in pruriceptive transmission, including transducers for histaminergic and interleukin-31-mediated itch.



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## Discussion

The results presented here show that the Y<sub>2</sub> receptor is expressed in Itch Nppb primary afferent neurons and that activation of this inhibitory G protein-coupled receptor reduces histamine-, 48/80- and IL-31-induced itch, whereas the scratch behavioral responses induced by the other tested non-histaminergic pruritogens or mechanical stimuli were unaffected by the NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system.

*Y<sub>2</sub>-primary afferent neurons are implicated in the sensations of touch, pin-prick pain and itch*

In previous studies, *Npy2r* primary afferents have been shown to mediate the sensation of pinprick pain (Arcourt et al., 2017) and be related to low threshold mechanical responsiveness (Li et al., 2011). Arcourt and co-workers used optogenetics to activate *Npy2r*-Cre expressing neurons in the dorsal root ganglia, using a BAC transgene, which resulted in a nocifensive behavior that they related to the selective activation of *Npy2r* nociceptors that showed partial co-expression of TrkA and CGRP and formed free nerve endings in the skin (Arcourt et al., 2017). Li and co-workers, on the other hand, used a *Npy2r*-GFP mouse line and reported that *Npy2r*-GFP primary afferents are A $\beta$  RA-LTMRs that form longitudinal lanceolate endings associated with hair follicles (Li et al., 2011). Thus, previous analyses are inconclusive regarding the role of Y<sub>2</sub> primary afferents in somatosensation.

Our analysis of 2406 primary afferent neurons, from three different scRNA-seq dataset (Usoskin et al., 2015; Li et al., 2016; Zeisel et al., 2018), showed that *Npy2r* mRNA is expressed in just 8% (11/139) of A $\beta$ -LTMRs, 10% (8/82) of A $\delta$ -LTMR

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and 2% (9/526) of C-LTMR and that most *Npy2r* expressing cells could be found in the itch associated class ( Itch Nppb 45% (148/331) and pain-associated classes C-nociceptor 22% (72/331) and A $\delta$ -nociceptor 15% (50/331) according to the Gatto nomenclature (Figure 6D). Moreover, an analysis describing the role of the Runx1 transcription factor in itch-related primary afferents showed that the dorsal root ganglia of *Runx1;Wnt1-Cre* conditional knockout mice were completely ablated of *Npy2r* mRNA and various itch-associated receptors and transducers including *Nppb*, *Il31ra*, *Osmr* and *Mrgpra3* and consequently displayed diminished responses to most pruritogens tested including 48/80,  $\alpha$ -methyl-5HT, IL-31 and chloroquine (Qi et al., 2017), indicating a role of the NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system in pruritogenic processes. Indeed, our analyses showed that activation of the inhibitory receptor Y<sub>2</sub> dampens histamine-, 48/80- or IL-31-induced itch. Additionally, Itch Nppb neurons express genes associated with histamine signaling (*Hrh1*, *Trpv1*, *Plcb3*) and IL-31 signaling (*Il31ra*, *Osmr*), and low/absent levels of mRNA for the chloroquine receptor *MrgprA3* or the main SLIGRL receptor *MrgprX1* (*MrgprC11*), showing that NPY and Y<sub>2</sub> are indeed involved in specific regulation of histaminergic and IL-31-evoked itch. Thus, so far, Y<sub>2</sub> has been associated with A $\beta$  RA-LTMRs (touch, transgenic line) (Li et al., 2011), pin-prick pain ((Arcourt et al., 2017), transgenic line) and itch ((Qi et al., 2017), transgenic line, and the pharmacological experiments reported here). Future analysis, using transgenic tools that enable selective targeting of the different sub-classes of *Npy2r* mRNA-expressing primary afferent neurons ( Itch Nppb, C/A $\delta$ -nociceptors and A $\beta$ /A $\delta$ /C- LTMR, respectively), would enable us to link each population to a specific sensory role.

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A potential caveat when using pharmacological tools is their limited anatomical specificity. Because low expression of *Npy2r* also can be detected in 5.5 % of spinal dorsal horn neurons, with 77.6 % of these belonging to inhibitory and 22.4 % to excitatory subpopulations (Häring et al., 2018), we cannot rule out that Y<sub>2</sub> could have functions in the modulation of pruriceptive signaling also within the spinal cord. However, the expression level of *Npy2r* is limited and the overlap between *Npy2r* and key itch-associated markers in the spinal cord are low. Only 3.5 % of *Npy2r* neurons express *Grpr* or *Bhlhb5* (*Bhlhe22*), whereas 17.6% express *Grp* but only 1.1% express both the *Npr1* (the *Nppb* receptor) and *Grp* transcripts, thus representing the *Nppb*/itch associated part of the *Grp* population (Häring et al., 2018; Mishra and Hoon 2013). Also, dorsal rhizotomy completely abolish Y<sub>2</sub> immunoreactivity in the spinal cord (Brumovsky et al., 2005) suggesting that Y<sub>2</sub> is predominately located to the central terminals of primary afferents projecting to the spinal cord and that NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> inhibits itch mainly through the interaction with itch-associated primary afferents.

#### *Itch Nppb primary afferents co-express somatostatin and Nppb*

The neuropeptides *Nppb* and *Sst* are highly co-expressed in the Itch *Nppb* population (Gatto et al., 2019)(Fig. 6D). *Nppb* is a well-established mediator of itch (Mishra and Hoon 2013; Pitake et al., 2018), and activation of *Sst* primary afferents induces scratching (Huang et al., 2018), while ablation of primary afferent *Sst* neurons decreases scratching induced by IL-31, histamine, chloroquine and LY344864 (a 5HT<sub>1F</sub> agonist) (Stantcheva et al., 2016), arguing that *Npy2r/Nppb/Sst* -rich primary afferents mediate itch (Fig. 6E).

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Five somatostatin receptor subtypes are found in mammals, and they have similar signaling pathways (Schulz et al., 2018). Among these, the Sst2a receptor is almost exclusively expressed by inhibitory neurons in the spinal cord (Häring et al., 2018). This ligand-receptor interaction leads to neuronal hyperpolarization (Yin et al., 2009) and targeting Sst2a with a specific agonist increases, whereas a specific antagonist decreases, histamine-, Nppb- and Grp-induced scratching, suggesting a disinhibition mechanism (Huang et al., 2018). As *Sst*, *Nppb* and *Npy2r* display extensive overlap in primary afferent neurons, this suggests that the Itch Nppb neurons may promote scratching both by driving itch circuits via excitation and disinhibition (Fig. 6E).

#### *Spinal NPY interneurons can dampen itch in several possible ways*

Spinal NPY interneurons are activated by noxious mechanical, chemical, temperature and touch stimuli (Polgar et al., 2013; Liu et al., 2010; Bourane et al., 2015) and could hence represent neuronal population enabling counter-stimuli, for instance scratch or noxious heat, to inhibit itch (Fig. 6E). Ablation of spinal NPY neurons results in allodynia to mechanical stimuli and spontaneous scratching, indicating that NPY neurons indeed gate/inhibit itch (Bourane et al., 2015). We could recently show that selective activation of spinal Y<sub>1</sub> expressing neurons reduces the duration and frequency of mechanically induced scratching and the duration of histamine or 48/80-induced scratching, resulting in shorter scratch episodes (Gao et al., 2018). The Y<sub>1</sub> receptor is mainly expressed by excitatory interneurons (Häring et al., 2018), showing partly overlapping Sst expression (Zhang et al., 1999). Sst in turn inhibits inhibitory (disinhibition) Bhlhb5 neurons implicated in the regulation of itch (Kardon et al., 2014; Ross et al., 2010) (Fig. 6E). Hence, our data now indicate that NPY can reduce itch (scratching behavior) both through Y<sub>1</sub>-mediated inhibition of spinal circuits,

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which reduces the length of the episodes of scratching (counter-stimuli) (Gao et al., 2018), and through  $Y_2$ -mediated inhibition of itch-transmitting primary afferents, which results in a reduction of both the initiation of scratching/perception of itch (fewer scratch episodes) and the duration of the behavior (Fig. 6E). The NPY/ $Y_1/Y_2$  system thus constitutes an elaborate circuit that controls itch transmission both by reducing the perceived itch and by making the counter-stimuli (scratch) more efficient in relieving itch.

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## **Author contribution**

*Participated in research design:* Lagerström, Gao, Ma, Jakobsson, Xu, Larhammar and Weman. *Conducted experiments:* Gao and Ma conducted the behavioral experiment and analyzed the videos. Gao and Ma conducted the statistical analysis. Jakobsson and Weman conducted the bioinformatical part. *Contributed new reagents or analytic tools:* Larhammar contributed with and Xu prepared and blinded the intrathecally given agonists and antagonists. *Performed data analysis:* Gao, Ma, Jakobsson and Weman. *Wrote or contributed to the writing of the manuscript:* All authors contributed to the writing of the manuscript.

## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## Figure legends

### **Fig. 1. Activation of the NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system reduces histaminergic itch**

(A) the effect of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (200 pM or 2 nM) or saline on histamine (100 µg)- or 48/80 (100 µg)-induced scratch episode duration (total time spent scratching); (B) scratch episode frequency (number of scratch episodes) and, (C) duration/frequency (mean length of scratch episodes). Each individual animal is plotted in the diagrams. ns>0.05, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001. (A-C) PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (2 nM or 200 pM) One-way ANOVA with Bonferroni's Multiple Comparison Test (GraphPad Prism, CA).

### **Fig. 2. The Y<sub>2</sub> antagonist BIIE0246 blocks the effect of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> on scratch behavior.**

(A) the effect of BIIE0246 (1µM) (0.9 µg/mL) or saline administrated 10 minutes before PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (200 pM), or BIIE0246 alone on 48/80 (100 µg)-induced scratch episode duration (total time spent scratching); (B) scratch episode frequency (number of scratch episodes) and, (C) duration/frequency (mean length of scratch episodes), each individual animal is plotted in the diagrams. ns>0.05, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001. (A) BIIE0246+ PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (200 pM) unpaired t-test, passed D'Agostino & Pearson normality test; (B-C) BIIE0246+ PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (200 pM), Mann-Whitney test; (A-C) BIIE0246 (1µM) unpaired t-test, passed D'Agostino & Pearson normality test (GraphPad Prism, CA).

### **Fig. 3. Activation of the NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system does not affect non-histaminergic itch induced by α-methyl-5HT, SLIGRL or chloroquine**

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(A) the effect of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (200 pM or 2 nM) or saline on non-histaminergic  $\alpha$ -methyl-5HT, SLIGRL or chloroquine (CQ)-induced scratch episode duration; (B) scratch episode frequency and, (C) duration/frequency. Each individual animal is plotted in the diagrams. ns>0.05, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001. (A-C),  $\alpha$ -methyl-5HT, One-way ANOVA with Bonferroni's Multiple Comparison Test (GraphPad Prism, CA). (A-C), SLIGRL and CQ, Mann-Whitney test (GraphPad Prism, CA).

**Fig. 4. The NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system regulates IL-31-induced itch but not persistent atopic dermatitis-associated itch**

(A) the effect of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (2 nM) or saline on IL-31-induced or persistent atopic dermatitis-associated (Nc/Nga) scratch episode duration; (B) scratch episode frequency and, (C) duration/frequency. Each individual animal is plotted in the diagrams. ns>0.05, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001. (A) IL-31, MannWhitney test (GraphPad Prism, CA). (B-C) IL-31, unpaired t-test, passed D'Agostino & Pearson normality test (GraphPad Prism, CA). (A-C) Persistent itch model Nc/Nga, paired t-test, passed D'Agostino & Pearson normality test (GraphPad Prism, CA).

**Fig. 5. Activation of the NPY/Y<sub>2</sub> system does not affect mechanical itch**

(A) the effect of PYY<sub>3-36</sub> (2 nM) or saline on shake episode duration induced by five applications of 0.07 g von Frey filament; (B) on shake episode frequency or on (C) mean length of shake episode. Each individual animal is plotted in the diagrams. (A-C) Mann-Whitney t-test (GraphPad Prism, CA).

**Fig. 6. *Npy2r* primary afferent neurons express itch-associated genes**

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(A) The datasets were transformed using Mutual Nearest Neighbor transformation. The left PCA plot shows the top 2 principal components of the scRNA seq neurons from the Usoskin et al., Zeisel et al. and Li et al. dataset, respectively. The right plot represents the top 2 principal components of neurons after scaling and transformation.

(B) Gatto cell type labels available to Usoskin and Zeisel datasets were used to train a linear support vector classification algorithm that was used to predict cell type labels of Li neurons. To the left is a uniform manifold approximation and projection (UMAP) plot with Gatto cell types for all neurons in the Usoskin and Zeisel datasets and Li dataset in red. Right figure represents the neurons after cell type prediction.

(C) Distribution of neurons from different datasets in cell type populations. Height of the bars represents number of cells. (D) Dotplot of itch-related genes grouped by cell type. Percent of cells in a population that expresses a gene is represented by the dot size. The mean expression of a gene in the population is represented by the dot color.

(E) A simplified schematic drawing that indicates how the NPY/Y<sub>1</sub>/Y<sub>2</sub> system is suggested to inhibit chemical itch transmission. Circels denote populations of neurons. Extended from (Gao et al., 2018; Kardon et al., 2014; Mishra and Hoon 2013).

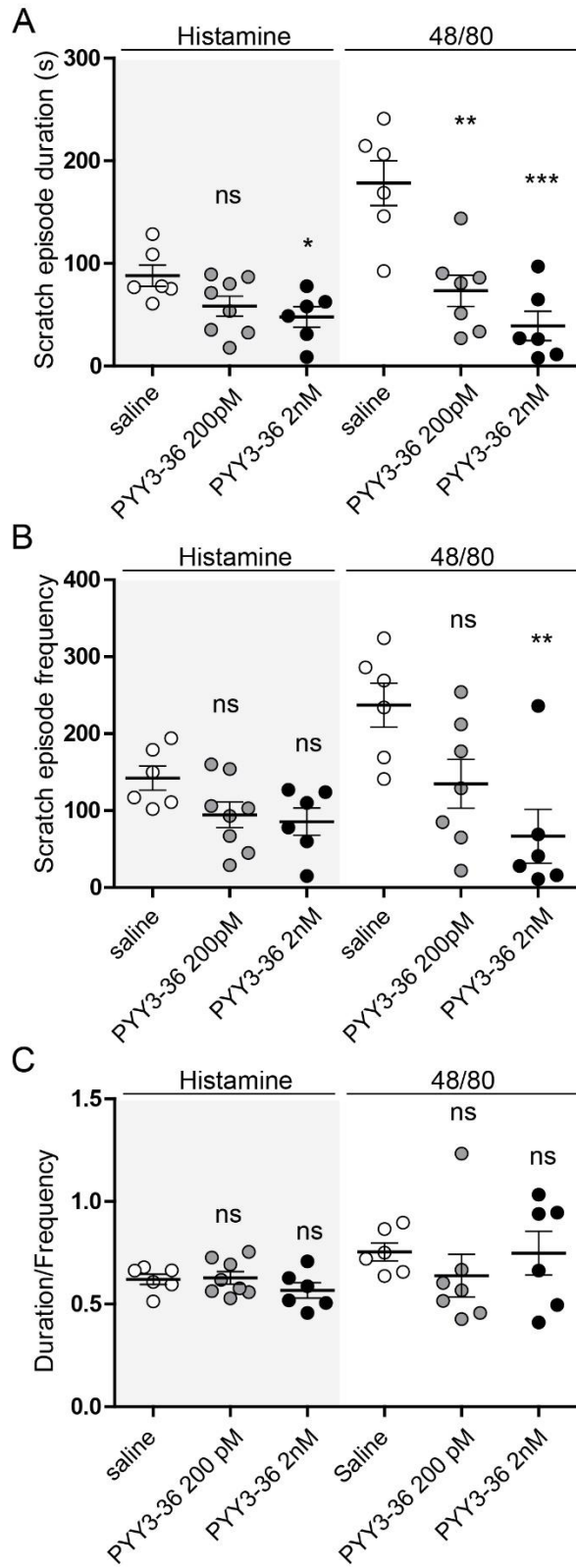
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**Table 1. Differentially expressed (DE) genes in the Itch Nppb population.** Top 20

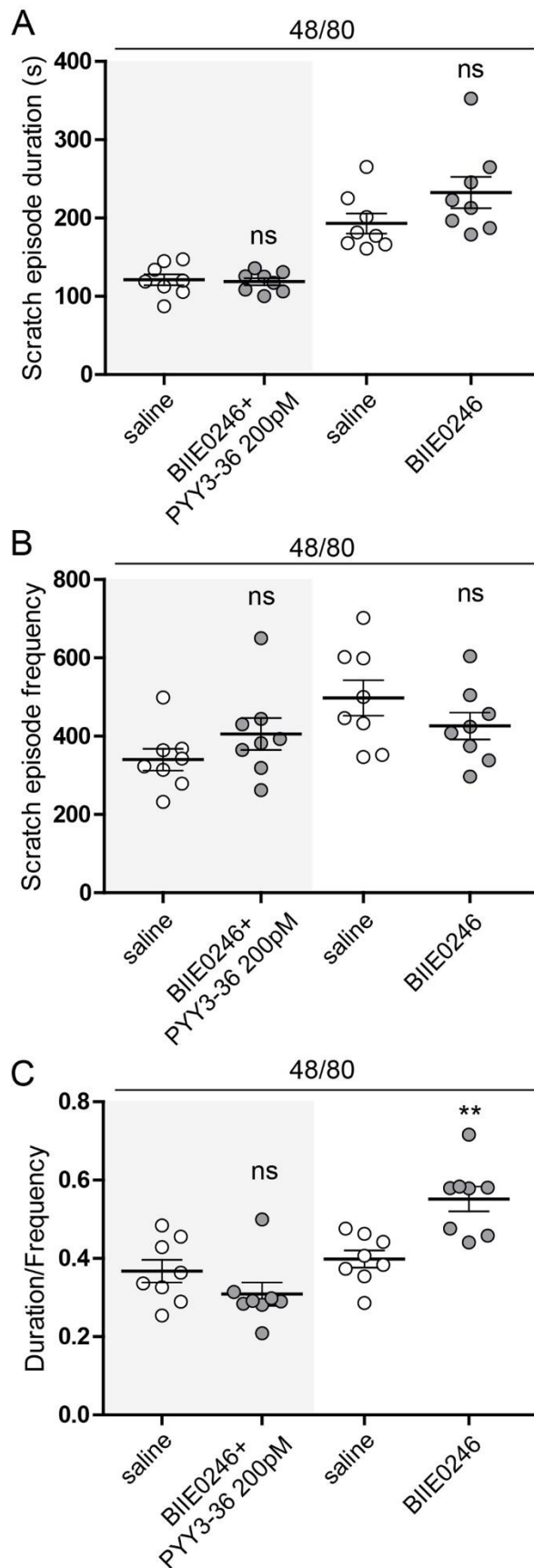
DE genes compared to all other sequenced primary afferent populations. Log fold change represent the log<sub>2</sub> fold change for each gene, score represents the z-score from p-value calculation and p-values are adjusted using the Benjamini-hochberg method (<https://genomebiology.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13059-017-1382-0>).

<b>Gene</b>	<b>Log fold change</b>	<b>Score</b>	<b>p value</b>
<i>Nts</i>	7,6	17,5	1,3E-36
<i>Sst</i>	7,9	15,5	1,3E-30
<i>Il31ra</i>	7,5	15,1	3E-29
<i>Ada</i>	5,7	13,7	2,1E-26
<i>Osmr</i>	5,3	13,6	3,5E-27
<i>Jak1</i>	3,9	13,4	1,1E-28
<i>Nppb</i>	7,4	12,8	2,1E-23
<i>Fam210b</i>	4,2	12,3	5,9E-23
<i>Pxmp2</i>	3,1	12,0	1,3E-23
<i>Htr1f</i>	5,2	11,9	6,4E-22
<i>Npy2r</i>	5,5	11,6	1,3E-20
<i>Tesc</i>	3,4	11,4	4,6E-22
<i>Adk</i>	3,5	11,2	2,9E-21
<i>9230105E05Rik</i>	10,5	11,2	1,1E-18
<i>Mical1</i>	3,6	11,1	5,5E-21
<i>Scg2</i>	3,6	11,1	5,2E-21
<i>Htr1a</i>	4,7	11,0	2,1E-19
<i>Cmtm7</i>	4,7	10,7	1,6E-18
<i>Tspan8</i>	3,7	10,5	3,4E-19
<i>Gm525</i>	6,8	10,4	1E-16

**Figure 1**

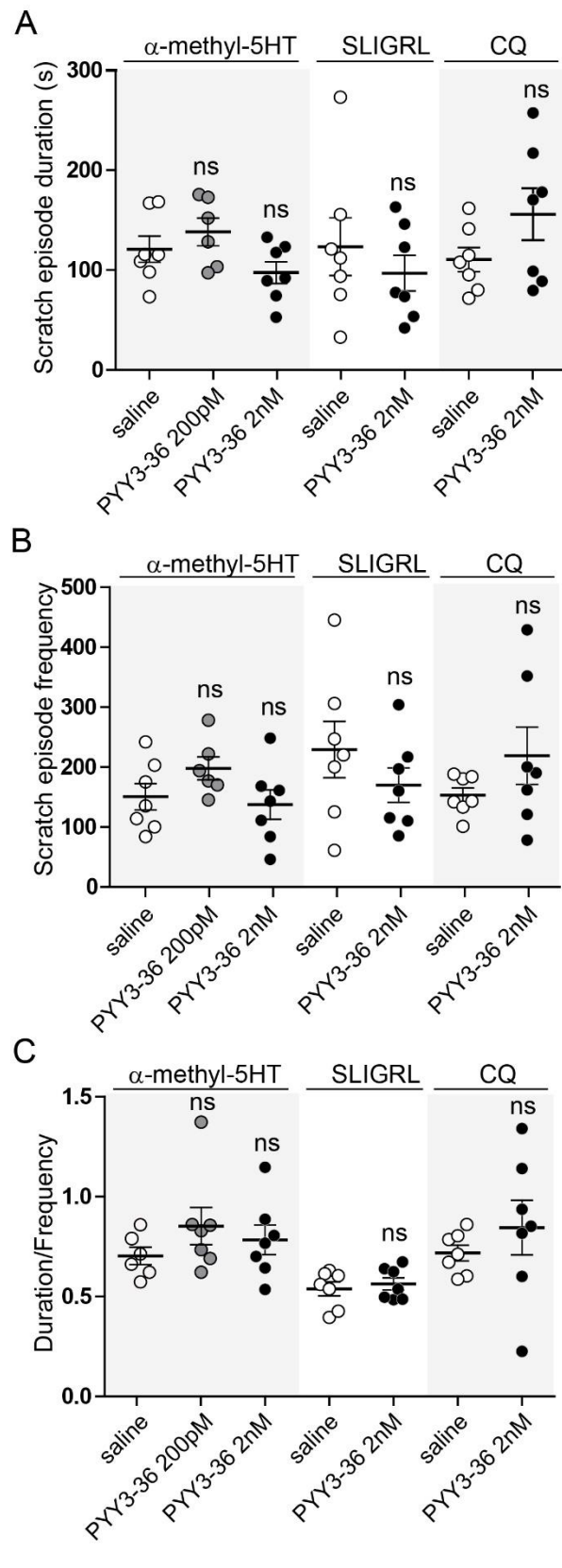


**Figure 2**

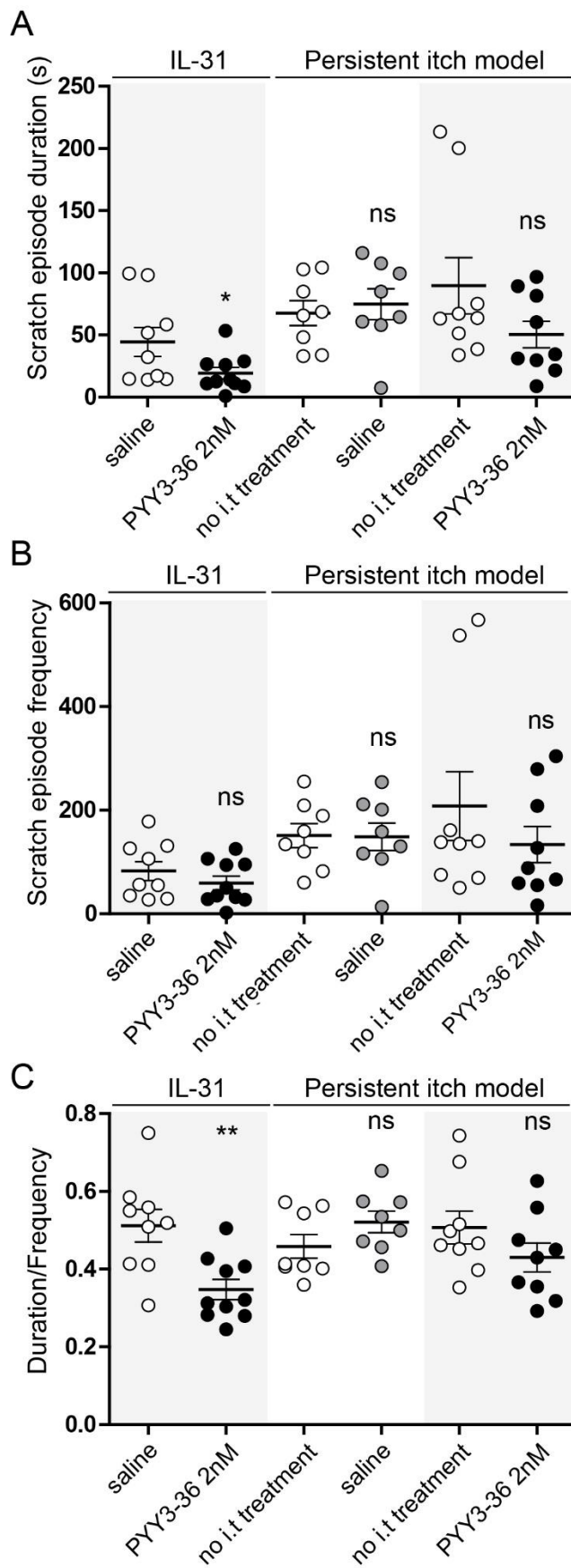




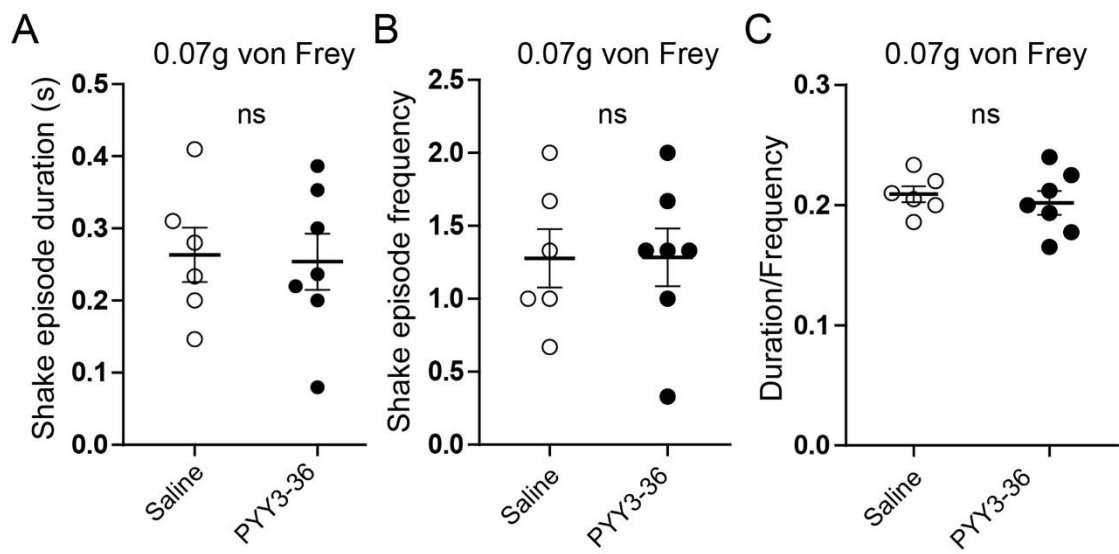
**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**



**Figure 5**



**Figure 6**

