Synthesis of novel 2-(piperazino-1-yl-alkyl)-1H-benzimidazole derivate and assessment of their interactions with the D₂ dopamine receptor

JELENA Z. PENJIŠEVIĆ¹, DEANA B. ANDRIĆ², VLADIMIR B. ŠUKALOVIĆ¹, GORAN M. ROGLIĆ²†, VUKIĆ SOŠKIĆ³ and SLADANA V. KOSTIĆ-RAJAČIĆ¹*

¹ICTM-Department of Chemistry, University of Belgrade, Njegoševa 12, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia, ²Faculty of Chemistry, University of Belgrade, Studentski trg 12–16, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia and ³Orgentec GmbH, Carl-Zeiss-Str. 49, 55129 Mainz, Germany

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Abstract: A total of 14 novel arylpiperazines were synthesized, and pharmacologically evaluated by measuring their affinities towards the D₂ dopamine receptor (DRD2) in a [³H]spiperone competition assay. All the herein described compounds consist of a benzimidazole moiety connected to N-(2-methoxyphenyl)piperazine via linkers of various lengths. Molecular docking analysis and molecular dynamics simulations were performed on the DRD2–arylpiperazine complexes with the objective of exploring the receptor–ligand interactions and properties of the receptor binding site. The recently published crystal structure of DRD2 was used throughout this study. The major finding is that high affinity arylpiperazines must interact with both the orthosteric binding site and the extended binding pocket of DRD2 and therefore should contain a linker of 5 or 6 methylene groups long.

Keywords: arylpiperazines; molecular dynamics; molecular docking; receptor binding site.

INTRODUCTION

Dopamine receptors belong to the rhodopsin-like, aminergic G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) group. They are involved in many physiological processes and play important role in the central nervous system (CNS).¹–⁴

Targeting the dopamine D2 receptors (DRD2) is a common strategy for the treatment of neurodegenerative diseases, such as schizophrenia, Parkinson’s disease, dementia and depression.⁵–⁸

It is a well-documented fact that N-substituted arylpiperazines are compounds with pronounced DRD2 activity.⁹,¹⁰ Since arylpiperazines have a wide
spectrum of therapeutic potentials and the design, synthesis and characterization of new arylpiperazine like drugs is an ever growing field of research.\textsuperscript{11–14}

In this paper, the synthesis of 14 new \(N\)-(2-methoxyphenyl)piperazinones of the general structure 5 (Scheme 1) is presented. Their affinities towards DRD2 were evaluated in the \([3^\text{H}]\)spiperone competition assay.

Recent discovery of DRD2 crystal structure with bound risperidone\textsuperscript{15} defined the receptor binding site with greater accuracy than existing homology models. This finding prompted us to investigate DRD2–arylpiperazine binding features, using molecular docking analysis and molecular dynamics simulations in order to define key receptor–ligand interactions and explain the dopaminergic properties of the herein described compounds.

EXPERIMENTAL

The reagents and solvents used in this work were obtained from Alfa–Aesar or Sigma–Aldrich and used without further purification. Solvents were routinely dried over anhydrous \(\text{Na}_2\text{SO}_4\) prior to evaporation.

General

A Boetius PHMK apparatus (VEB Analytic, Dresden, Germany) was used to determine the melting points, which are here presented uncorrected. The \(^1\text{H}-\text{NMR}\) and \(^1\text{C}-\text{NMR}\) spectra were recorded at 200 and 50 MHz, respectively, on a Gemini 2000 (Varian, Oxford). The spectra were recorded in deuterochloroform with tetramethylsilane as the internal standard; the chemical shifts (\(\delta\)) are reported in parts per million (ppm); all coupling constants (\(J\) values) are reported in Hz. LC/MS was performed on a 6210 time-of-flight LC–MS system (Agilent Technologies, Germany). For data analysis, MassHunter workstation software was used. The infrared (IR) spectra were obtained on a Thermo Scientific spectrometer. For analytical thin-layer chromatography (TLC), Polygram SIL G/UV 254 plastic-backed thin layer silica gel plates were used (Macherey–Nagel, Germany). The chromatographic purifications were performed on Merck-60 silica gel columns (230–400 mesh ASTM) under medium pressure (dry column flash chromatography). Analytical and spectral data for the synthesized compounds are given in Supplementary material to this paper. A MicroSYNTH Milestone and a Biotage Initiator 2.5 EXP were used for the microwave experiments.

Chemistry

General procedure for the synthesis of compounds 3a–g. A suspension of 1-(2-methoxyphenyl)piperazine (1, 0.084 mol), triethylamine (0.0874 mol), \(\text{K}_2\text{CO}_3\) (0.175 mol) and bromoester 2a–g (0.084 mol) in 2-butanone (100 mL) was stirred for 24 h at 80 °C. After cooling, the mixture was poured into cold water and the organic layer was extracted with \(\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2\) and concentrated \textit{in vacuo}. The resulting ester was purified by silica gel column chromatography using a gradient of methanol (0–5 %) in dichloromethane.

General procedure for the synthesis of compounds 5a–n. Compounds 3a–g (0.0035 mol) and diamines 4a–c (0.0035 mol) were suspended in 8 mL 50 % methanesulfonic acid in water, transferred into a sealed tube, and microwave irradiated at 180 °C for 45 min at 300 W. After cooling to room temperature, the reaction mixture was poured into ice-cold water and neutralized with a saturated solution of NaOH. The product was extracted with \(\text{CH}_2\text{Cl}_2\) and concentrated \textit{in vacuo}. The resulting \(^{1\text{H}}\)-benzimidazoles were purified by silica gel column chromatography using a gradient of methanol (0–5 %) in dichloromethane.
Biological assays

Membrane preparation. Rat caudate nuclei synaptosomal membranes for the DRD2 binding experiments were prepared as previously described. Striatal tissue acquired from male Wistar rats (150–200 g) was used as the source of DRD2. The tissue was homogenized in 20 volumes of ice-cold 50 mM Tris-HCl buffer containing 120 mM NaCl, 5 mM KCl, 1 mM MgCl₂ and 2 mM CaCl₂ using a Potter–Elvehjem homogenizer (6×800 rpm). The membrane fraction obtained after centrifugation at 20000 rpm for 15 min was used in the binding experiments.

[^3H]Spiperone receptor binding assay.[^3H]Spiperone (73.36 Ci mmol⁻¹, Perkin Elmer LAS GmbH, Rodgau, Germany) binding was assayed in 1.0 mM EDTA, 4 mM MgCl₂, 1.5 mM CaCl₂, 5 mM KCl, 120 mM NaCl, 25 mM Tris-HCl solution, pH 7.4, with rat caudate nuclei synaptosomal membranes (protein concentration 0.6 mg mL⁻¹), at 37 °C for 10 min in a total volume of incubation mixture of 0.4 mL. The binding of the radioligand to 5-HT₂ receptors was prevented by 50 mM ketanserin. The $K_i$ values of the tested compounds were determined by competition binding at 0.2 nM of the radioligand and eight different concentrations of each compound (10⁻⁴–10⁻¹⁰ M). Nonspecific binding was determined in the presence of 10 µM spiperone. The reaction was terminated by rapid filtration through Whatman GF/C filters, washed three times with 5.0 mL of ice-cold incubation buffer, and the retained radioactivity was measured in a 1219 Rackbeta Wallac scintillation counter (EG&G Wallac, Turku, Finland). Inhibition curve construction and statistical (Student’s $t$-test) analysis were performed by Graph-Pad Prism (GraphPad Software Inc). Hill slope coefficients were fixed to unity during the calculations.

Computational study

Docking simulations. The docking procedure was performed using Forecaster software. The receptor model PDB code 6CM4 was used together with 2D structures of the ligands, prepared in ChemDraw. All structures were prepared in the software using default procedures. Rigid receptor, flexible ligand docking was carried out. The obtained docking structures were examined and structures with the maximum number of receptor–ligand interactions were selected for further analysis.

Binding poses metadynamics. The docking pose quality was assessed in terms of the fluctuations of the ligand RMSD (the root-mean-square deviation of atomic positions), and the persistence of important contacts between the ligand and the receptor (Metadynamics Binding PoseScore and Metadynamics Binding Persistence) using Desmond software and default parameters. One docking pose with the lowest RMSD and best overall score was selected for molecular dynamics (MD) simulations.

Construction of a protein–membrane system for molecular dynamics. The protein protonation state was adjusted using the Schrodinger Protein Preparation module, at physiological pH (pH 7.4). The prepared protein was embedded into a POPC membrane bilayer using the Desmond system builder module, and oriented according to data from the Orientations of Proteins in Membranes (OPM) server. The embedded protein was solvated with TIP3P explicit water model, and the system was neutralized via counter ions and a salt solution of 0.15 M KCl. In this way, systems were obtained that were subjected to membrane relaxation protocol.

MD simulations. Molecular dynamics (MD) simulations of the system were performed using Schrodinger Desmond software packages. OPLS 2003 forcefield was used to calculate the interactions between all the atoms. For the calculation of long-range coulombic interactions, the particle–mesh Ewald (PME) method was used, with a cut-off radius of 9 Å for short-range van der Waals (vdW) and electrostatic interactions.
During the course of the simulation, a constant temperature of 310 K and a pressure of 1.01235 bar were maintained, using a Nose–Hoover thermostat, and the Martyna–Tobias–Klein method. Time increments of 2.0 fs were used in the simulations. Finally, 100 ns MD simulation for each ligand–DRD2 complex was performed and the collected trajectory frames used in the MD analysis to quantify the protein–ligand interactions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Compounds 5a–n were synthesized according to Scheme 1. The synthesis started with N-(2-methoxyphenyl)piperazine (1) that was alkylated with a series of homologous bromo-esters 2a–g, providing N-alkylated products 3a–g. Counterp-art diamines 4a–c were obtained by reduction of the corresponding 2-nitro precursors, using Raney-Ni and hydrazine hydrate under conditions described in earlier publications. Microwave assisted condensation of piperazines 3a–g and diamines 4a–c, under forcing, strongly acidic conditions, secured the desired benzimidazoles 5a–n.

![Scheme 1. Synthesis of the compounds 5a–n](image)

DRD2 binding affinities of compounds 5a–5n were evaluated in vitro using [3H]spiperone as a standard dopaminergic radioactive ligand (Table I).

Molecular docking simulation of the herein described 2-[[4-(2-methoxyphenyl)piperazin-1-yl]alkyl]-1H-benzo[d]imidazoles on D2DR was performed on the D2DR crystal structure published recently by Wang et al. They reported that the benzisoxazole moiety of risperidone interact with D2DR through Cys1183.36, Thr1193.37, Ser1975.46, Phe1985.47, Phe3826.44, Phe3906.52 and Trp3866.48 in the orthosteric binding site (OBS). OBS of D2DR is defined by the amino acid side chains of helices III, V and VI and also harbour Asp1143.32. Asp1143.32 forms an essential salt-bridge with protonated piperidine nitrogen of risperidone molecule. In addition D2DR has a secondary binding pocket, extended binding pocket (EBP), that encloses the tetrahydropyridopyrimidinone.
moiety of risperidone. EBP is bordered by the extracellular part of TM VII consisting of an extracellular loop 1 (EL1) and the junction of helices I, II and VII.15

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Molecular docking simulations on the binding of 2-[[4-(2-methoxyphenyl)piperazin-1-yl]alkyl]-1$H$-benzimidazoles into the crystal structure of DRD2 show that the (2-methoxyphenyl)piperazine moiety occupies DRD2 OBS, and interacts with Asp114$^{3.32}$, Cys118$^{3.36}$, Trp386$^{6.48}$ and Phe390$^{6.52}$, while the benzimidazole part interacts with Leu94$^{2.64}$, Ile184$^{EL2}$,Trp100$^{EL1}$, Phe389$^{6.51}$, Thr412$^{7.39}$ and Tyr408$^{7.35}$ in the EBP (Fig. 1).

Compounds with optimal linker length (five or six methylene groups in the linker) allow the benzimidazole moiety to reach EBP and to interact with Leu94$^{2.64}$, Trp100$^{EL1}$, Phe389$^{6.51}$, Thr412$^{7.39}$ and Tyr408$^{7.35}$ (Fig. 2). Compounds with shorter linker (5a–d) do not reach into the EBP, while ligands with seven methylene groups in the linker (5g and 5k) are too long to fit optimally into the D2DR binding cleft and protrude into the extracellular space.

These results are in agreement with experimental data: compound 5d (with a 4 methylene groups linker) has affinity of over 1000 nM, while compounds 5e and 5f (with 5 and 6 methylene groups linker, respectively) have 24 and 16 nM, respectively. Compound 5g shows a sharp drop in affinity because of the length of the linker, which cannot be accommodated in the DRD2 bind cleft.
In series of compounds substituted with methoxy and chloro groups, the highest DRD2 affinity was obtained with compounds 5i and 5m. Linker with 5 methylene groups facilitates optimal positioning of substituted benzimidazole part in the receptor EBP (Fig. 1). Shorter linkers, as it is obvious in series 5h–k and 5l–n, lead to decrease in receptor affinity due to sub-optimal placement of benzimidazole part in regard to the interacting residues Trp100EL1 and Tyr4087.35.

To test the stability of obtained docking poses, MD simulations of the DRD2 and selected ligands were performed on inactive receptor state for 100 ns for each ligand. Obtained trajectories were analyzed with focus on the residues that form OBS and EBP (Table S-I of the Supplementary material).

Most of the receptor–ligand interactions in OBS, observed in molecular docking simulations, persisted for a significant portion of MD run (>20 % total simulation time). Compounds with significant DRD2 affinity (5e–f, 5h–j and 5l–n) had a salt bridge between the protonated piperazine nitrogen of the ligand and Asp1143.32 of DRD2 preserved for more than 79–84 % of the simulation time. Additional interactions in OBS are aromatic interaction with Cys1183.36 (32–75 % of the simulation time), and edge-to-face interactions with Trp3866.48 (76–98 % of the simulation time) and Phe3906.52 (20–49 % of the simulation time). In the EBP, significant interactions are aromatic interactions (edge-to-face type) with Trp100EL1, Phe3896.51 and Tyr4087.35. Compounds 5e, 5f, 5i and 5m form an additional hydrogen bond with Thr4127.39.
Fig. 2. Results of docking simulations for ligand 5e (A), 5f (B), 5i (C) and 5m (D) are presented. Schematic representation of the best docking pose for all ligands are provided. For clarity, only amino acid residues in close contact with ligands are shown. Solid lines represent aromatic, while dotted lines represent electrostatic interactions.
CONCLUSIONS

Molecular docking and MD simulation provide important information that explains how the receptor–ligand complexes are formed. High affinity 2-\{(4-(2-methoxyphenyl)piperazin-1-yl)alkyl\}-1H-benzimidazoles must simultaneously occupy both OBS and EBP.

To establish key interactions both in OBS (salt bridge formation and aromatic interactions) and EBP (aromatic interactions and hydrogen bond formation), the ligands should have a linker of five or six methylene groups. Linker flexibility and substituent size in the benzimidazole moiety determine ligand positioning inside the EBP and brings it in close contact with Trp100\(^{EL1}\) and Tyr408\(^{7.35}\), which are key interacting residues. Additionally, as can be concluded from the results of molecular dynamics, the affinity of the arylpiperazine ligands benefit greatly from possible formation of interactions of the arylpiperazine part of ligands with Thr412\(^{7.39}\) in EBP.

It is clear that both Trp100\(^{EL1}\) and Tyr408\(^{7.35}\) can form aromatic interactions and/or hydrogen bonds. To establish the exact nature of interactions in EBP, modification of presented ligands, in terms of target synthesis of the compounds which can strictly form only one of these interactions, represent a guideline for further investigation.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Analytical and spectral data for the synthesized compounds, as well as additional results, are available electronically from http://www.shd.org.rs/JSCS/, or from the corresponding author on request.

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ИЗВОД

СИНТЕЗА НОВИХ ДЕРИВАТА 2-(ПИПЕРАЗИНО-1-ИЛ-АЛКИЛ)-1H-БЕНЗИМИДАЗОЛА И ПРОУЧАВАЊЕ ИНТЕРАКЦИЈА СА Д2 ДОПАМИНСКИМ РЕЦЕПТОРОМ

ЈЕЛЕНА З. ПЕЊИШЕВИЋ, ДЕАНА Б. АНДРИЋ, ВЛАДИМИР Б. ШУКАЛОВИЋ, ГОРАН М. РОГЛИЋ, ВУКИЋ ШОШКИЋ и СЛАЂАНА В. КОСТИЋ-РАЈАЧИЋ

ИХТМ-Центар за хемију, Универзитет у Београду, Ндешева 12, 11000 Београд, 2Хемијски факултет, Универзитет у Београду, Саветницички арт12–16, 11000 Београд и 3Oргентек ГмбХ, Carl-Zeiss-Str. 49, 55129 Майнц, Германија

У овом раду је претстављена синтеза 14 нових арилпиперазина и одређен је њихов афинитет везивања за Д2 допамински рецептор (DRD2) тестовима компетиције са \(^{[3]}\)Нспипероном. По својој хемијској структури ова јединица представљају супституисане бензимидазоле повезане са N-(2-метоксифенил)пиперазинским делом, линкерима различитих дужина. У циљу испитивања лиганд рецептор интеракција и особина везивног места DRD2, урађена је доцни анализис новосинтетисаних јединица и симулација молекулске динамике, користећи кристалну структуру рецептора. Резултати добијени у овом раду указују на арилпиперазини високог афинитета остварују интеракције у ортостерном везив-
REFERENCES


