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Allosteric Optical Control of a Class B G-Protein-Coupled Receptor

Johannes Broichhagen, Natalie R. Johnston, Yorrick von Ohlen, Helena Meyer-Berg, Ben J. Jones, Stephen R. Bloom, Guy A. Rutter, Dirk Trauner,* and David J. Hodson*

Abstract: Allosteric regulation promises to open up new therapeutic avenues by increasing drug specificity at G-protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs). However, drug discovery efforts are at present hampered by an inability to precisely control the allosteric site. Herein, we describe the design, synthesis, and testing of PhotoETP, a light-activated positive allosteric modulator of the glucagon-like peptide-1 receptor (GLP-1R), a class B GPCR involved in the maintenance of glucose homeostasis in humans. PhotoETP potentiates Ca\textsuperscript{2+}, cAMP, and insulin responses to glucagon-like peptide-1 and its metabolites following illumination of cells with blue light. PhotoETP thus provides a blueprint for the production of small-molecule class B GPCR allosteric photoswitches, and may represent a useful tool for understanding positive cooperativity at the GLP-1R.

The incretin hormone glucagon-like peptide-1 (GLP-1) is released from enteroendocrine L-cells in the intestine,\cite{1} from where it binds cognate receptors to promote the survival of pancreatic beta cells, insulin release, and weight loss.\cite{2} For these reasons, incretin mimetics based on GLP-1 have become widely-prescribed drugs for the restoration of normal glucose levels in type 2 diabetes (T2D),\cite{3} a socio-economically costly syndrome affecting almost 400 million individuals worldwide.\cite{4}

The glucagon-like peptide 1 receptor (GLP-1R) is a class B G-protein-coupled receptor (GPCR) that is primarily coupled to adenylyl cyclase activity and 3'-5'-cyclic adenosine monophosphate (cAMP) accumulation,\cite{5} as well as intracellular Ca\textsuperscript{2+} fluxes.\cite{6} Recently, an allosteric site has been described for this receptor that allows fine modulation of orthosteric ligand binding.\cite{7} The ligand-dependent allosteric activator 4-(3-(benzylxoy)phenyl)-2-(ethylsulfinyl)-6-(trifluoromethyl)pyrimidine (BETP) potentiates Ca\textsuperscript{2+} mobilization in response to GLP-1(7-36)NH\textsubscript{2},\cite{7,8} the active amidated form of GLP-1. By contrast, BETP amplifies cAMP generation in response to GLP-1(9-36)NH\textsubscript{2},\cite{7,9} a metabolite and weak partial GLP-1R agonist. Such interactions are therapeutically desirable, since drugs that target the GLP-1R allosteric site may improve receptor specificity, thereby reducing side effects.\cite{7-9} However, their investigation is at present hindered by a lack of specific research tools for the fine control of allosterism and receptor movement. Photopharmacology is well-suited to this task, since it relies on the properties of light to precisely deliver drug activity in space and time.\cite{10}

Herein, we describe the development and testing of PhotoETP, a light-activated positive allosteric modulator that allows optical control of GLP-1R signaling and insulin secretion by using blue light (Figure 1A).

We set out to confer photoswitching on the GLP-1R allosteric site by subjecting BETP to our “azologization” strategy\cite{11} (Figure 1B; see also Figure S1 in the Supporting Information). By coupling commercially available chloropyrimidine 1 and boronic acid 2 under Suzuki–Miyaura conditions, bisaryl thioether 3 was obtained in a yield of 95%. After oxidizing the sulfur atom with mCPBA to its sulfone counterpart 4 in a yield of 90%, it was exchanged in an aromatic substitution with ethyl sulfide to give ethyl thioether 5 in a yield of 55%. Subsequent oxidation with one equivalent of mCPBA gave access to sulfoxide 6 (96%), which was deprotected with TFA before undergoing Mills reaction with...
This page provides a detailed description of the synthesis and characterization of PhotoETP, a light-switchable molecule designed to modulate GLP-1R activity. The molecule is synthesized from nitrosobenzene, yielding PhotoETP in a 54% yield through a two-step process. Crystals of PhotoETP are obtained for X-ray crystallography, demonstrating its potential for use in structural studies.

The UV/Vis spectrum of PhotoETP shows two states: trans and cis, with the trans form having little effect at λ = 440 nm and λ = 330 nm, whereas the cis form is observed at λ = 440 nm (blue) and λ = 330 nm (gray). The optical control of GLP-1(9-36)NH₂ induced effects is demonstrated, with PhotoETP potently amplifying cAMP responses to GLP-1 and its inactive metabolites, allowing for potential biological imaging applications.

The text includes references to previous work, such as the use of a photoswitch to modulate Ca²⁺ levels. The paper concludes with a discussion on the potential applications of PhotoETP in cellular studies, particularly in the context of glucose metabolism and cell viability.

**Figure 1.** Design and synthesis of PhotoETP. a) An azobenzene unit is installed on the positive allosteric modulator BETP to produce PhotoETP. This allows Ca²⁺ and cAMP responses to GLP-1 and its inactive metabolites to be potentiated following illumination with UV or blue light. b) Six-step synthetic pathway for the production of PhotoETP. c) Crystallization of PhotoETP as its methoxy counterpart (7) from MeOH. d) Crystal structures for PhotoETP congener 7 (CCDC 1420305) and its precursor bisaryl thioether 3 (CCDC 1420306) contain the supplementary crystallographic data for this paper. e) The effect of PhotoETP on cell viability was determined in islets by using necrosis and apoptosis assays in the dark. The concentration used throughout the present study, PhotoETP did not induce significant necrosis (Figure 3B) or apoptosis (Figure 3C), as measured using propidium iodide incorporation and terminal deoxynucleotidyl transferase dUTP nick end labelling (TUNEL), respectively.

**Figure 2.** Characterization of PhotoETP, a) Isomerization of PhotoETP between its trans- and cis- states with blue light or UV irradiation, respectively. b) UV/Vis spectra of PhotoETP in DMSO following illumination at λ = 440 nm (blue), λ = 330 nm (grey), or under dark conditions (black). c) Robust photoswitching between trans- and cis-PhotoETP induced with λ = 440 nm and λ = 330 nm, respectively. d) LC-MS trace of PhotoETP in the dark (black) and after exposure to UV light (λ = 350 nm; gray).

**Figure 3.** a) IC₅₀ values (in μM) showing potentiation of GLP-1(7-36)NH₂ induced increases in intracellular Ca²⁺ and cAMP levels in MIN6 beta cells subjected to high-throughput Ca²⁺ screens. The extent of photoswitching is similar to that recently reported for an allosteric modulator of the metabotropic glutamate receptor mGluR5, a class C GPCR. The effect of PhotoETP on cell viability was determined in islets by using necrosis and apoptosis assays in the dark. The concentration used throughout the present study, PhotoETP did not induce significant necrosis (Figure 3B) or apoptosis (Figure 3C), as measured using propidium iodide incorporation and terminal deoxynucleotidyl transferase dUTP nick end labelling (TUNEL), respectively.
Such a conformation may also be adopted by cis-PhotoETP owing to its higher affinity for covalent binding. However, in contrast to BETP, which can reorganize its molecular shape in response to orthosteric ligand binding, PhotoETP would remain trapped in its cis state until illumination to induce trans-isomerization. Although the exact isomer ratio at the receptor is difficult to determine empirically, such properties may nonetheless afford fine control over photoswitching, with dark conditions, 440 nm illumination, and 350 nm illumination leading to graded Ca\(^{2+}\) responses (Figure S4). Further studies using rigid E- and Z-stilbene bioisosteres of PhotoETP will be required to better delineate the mechanisms involved.

The data presented herein outline a straightforward synthetic strategy for the production of a blue-light-activated positive allosteric modulator, which enables photocontrol of GLP-1R activity through a feedforward loop encompassing the orthosteric site (Figure 1A). Although similar “allo-witches” have been described for ionotropic and metabotropic mGluRs,\(^{12,13}\) this is the first demonstration of their use in a therapeutically relevant class B GPCR. Using a combination of Ca\(^{2+}\), cAMP, and insulin assays in CHO-GLP-1R and MIN6 cells, as well as islets of Langerhans, we were able to show that PhotoETP allows photoswitching of responses to GLP-1(7-36)NH\(_3\), and its less active breakdown product, GLP-1(9-36)NH\(_3\), with similar potency to native BETP. Notably, PhotoETP displays unusual behavior in cells, where it shows an enriched cis content when interacting with its target in the dark. Indeed, the more active trans isomer has to be photochemically induced by irradiation with blue light. As a result of these properties, PhotoETP, together with the recently described signal-biased GLP-1R photo-switch LirAzo,\(^{14}\) may enable the precise dissection of allosteric–orthosteric cooperativity, molecular movement, and binding.

Both BETP and PhotoETP were more effective at potentiating GLP-1(9-36)NH\(_3\)-induced compared to GLP-1(7-36)NH\(_3\)-induced insulin secretion. This suggests that cAMP rather than Ca\(^{2+}\) is the primary driver of the “incretin effect”, and is consistent with previous results obtained using LirAzo.\(^{14}\) Intriguingly, optical control of insulin release could only be observed in GLP-1(9-36)NH\(_3\)- and PhotoETP-treated islets, where blue light provoked a two-fold higher response than UV illumination. Although the exact reasons for this remain unknown, it may reflect an inability to detect relatively small isomer-induced differences in intracellular Ca\(^{2+}\) versus cAMP concentration at the level of secretion in islets.

BETP was susceptible to UV-A-induced but not white-light-induced reactions, thus making it a poor control for photoswitching purposes (see Figure S5–S8). In contrast, PhotoETP was remarkably robust. This protective effect...
stems from the azobenzene unit, which preferentially harvests UV-A photons with its π-π* band to undergo isomerization. In other words, by installing an azobenzene moiety onto BETP, side reactions can be quenched and the resulting molecule stabilized. Nevertheless, the UV-A-induced rearrangement of BETP to its sulfenic ester counterpart via a Meisenheimer complex, and the accompanying transformation, is in itself an interesting finding (Figure S5,S6). Although related rearrangements of sulfoxides have been reported,[15] sulfenic esters have not been isolated as products owing to the low (UV-C) wavelengths used in these experiments. Such rearrangements are relevant for drug activity, as best exemplified by acid-activation of the irreversible proton-pump inhibitor omeprazole (Prilosec).[16]

In summary, we showcase PhotoETP, a light-activated modulator for allosteric optical control of GLP-1R function, and highlight the requirement to run parallel control experiments with benchmark drugs in photopharmacology. Photo-ETP, or optimized derivatives thereof, may be useful in drug-discovery programs aimed at unraveling the complexity of allosterism and class B GPCR signaling.

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Keywords: allosteric regulation · beta cells · GLP-1 receptor · photopharmacology · type 2 diabetes

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