

Histamine H3 receptor antagonist Clobenpropit protects propofol-induced apoptosis of hippocampal neurons through PI3K/AKT pathway

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Abstract. – OBJECTIVE: The aim of the study was to explore whether histamine H3 receptor antagonist Clobenpropit could protect propofol-induced neurotoxicity in hippocampal neurons.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: Hippocampal neurons were extracted from neonatal rats and induced with propofol. MTT (3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyl tetrazolium bromide) assay was performed to detect apoptotic rate of neurons. Western blot was conducted to detect protein levels of cleaved-caspase-3 and Bax/Bcl2. After LY294002 treatment, the PI3K pathway antagonist was applied in neurons, protein levels of cleaved-caspase-3 and Bax/Bcl2 were detected by Western blot as well.

RESULTS: Propofol treatment remarkably induced neuronal apoptosis. Clobenpropit alleviated cell apoptosis induced by propofol. Protein expressions of cleaved-caspase-3 and Bax/Bcl2 were remarkably downregulated in neurons treated with Clobenpropit. LY294002 induction remarkably reverses the protective role of Clobenpropit in neuronal apoptosis, manifesting as downregulated PI3K and p-AKT after LY294002 treatment.

CONCLUSIONS: Clobenpropit protects propofol-induced neuronal apoptosis through activating PI3K/AKT pathway.

Key Words:

Clobenpropit, Propofol, PI3K/AKT, Apoptosis.

Introduction

With the development of surgical techniques, the number of infants, children, and pregnant women undergoing surgeries have also increased, leading to the great concern on the side effects of anesthetics, especially on immature brains¹. The

anesthetic effect is mainly achieved by exciting gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) or inhibiting N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA)^{2,3}. However, studies have found that anesthetics have toxic effects on neurons in developmental stage, which may lead to neuronal apoptosis and brain damage⁴. General anesthesia has been applied for nearly two centuries⁵. With the increased amount of surgeries, anesthesia complications such as postoperative cognitive dysfunction have been focused on. In particular, the potential influences of anesthetics on learning and memory functions of children have been well concerned throughout the world^{6,7}. Propofol has been clinically applied for induction and maintenance of anesthesia since 1989. It has become an extremely useful drug for inducing and maintaining general anesthesia due to its rapid onset and recovery after withdrawal⁸. The anesthetic effect of propofol mainly relies on activating the type A receptor of GABA and inhibiting the NMDA receptor to some extent^{2,9}. The balance of GABA activation and NMDA inhibition maintains the survival and apoptosis of neurons¹⁰. During the developmental process of central nervous system, it is very sensitive to the external stimuli and the long-term cognitive function may be influenced. Propofol exerts relative small side effects on central nervous system in comparison with other anesthetics¹¹. However, recent investigations^{12,13} have pointed out that propofol administration may induce neurotoxicity in both *in vivo* and *in vitro* models. It is reported that administration of propofol alone or in combination with other drugs induces neuronal death in the experimental animals, leading to subsequent learning and memory im-

pairment¹⁴. There are many developmental events during neurogenesis, and propofol administration may affect neuronal functions at specific stages. Propofol may be involved in various cellular processes. Although many studies have found that propofol induces neurotoxicity in the brains of growing animals, the specific mechanism, however, has not been well understood. Current studies¹⁵⁻¹⁷ believed that the neurotoxic effects of propofol may involve in neural stem cell survival and neurogenesis, mitochondrial damage, calcium signal abnormalities, microRNAs-mediated mechanisms, BDNF dysregulation and inflammatory factors. In-depth studies are still required for fully investigations. Histamine is an important neurotransmitter or neuromodulator in the brain. There are four histamine receptors that have been already discovered, namely H1, H2, H3, and H4. Among them, H1 mainly presents in the postsynaptic membrane, whereas H3 receptor mainly presents in the presynaptic membrane¹⁸⁻²⁰. H3 receptors can negatively regulate the synthesis and release of histamine, while H4 receptors are currently reported to be involved in the immune response^{21, 22}. Histamine exerts various neuromodulation effects on sleep, wakefulness, learning, memory and feeding through its different receptors²³. Histamine H3 receptor antagonist can promote the synthesis and release of histamine. Many studies²⁴ have shown that H3 receptor antagonist is a very promising therapeutic drug in the treatment of neurological diseases, such as epilepsy, sleep disorders and memory disorders. For example, Pitolisant was the first clinically used H3 receptor antagonist in the treatment of sleep disorders, showing a good therapeutic effect. Histamine H3 receptor antagonists can reduce neuronal apoptosis and cerebral infarction volume after ischemia²⁵. The histamine receptor antagonist Clobenpropit protects NMDA-induced neuronal excitatory damage by elevating GABA concentration²⁶. So far, the effects and mechanisms of histamine H3 receptor and its antagonist on propofol-induced neuronal apoptosis are rarely reported. Phosphatidylinositol 3-kinase (PI3K) is an important cellular signal transduction molecule²⁷. PI3K can be activated by stimulation with extracellular signals, such as growth factors, cytokines, and hormones. Activation of PI3K produces 3,4-diphosphosphatidylinositol (PIP2) and 3,4,5-trisphosphonylphosphatidylinositol (PIP3). PIP3 subsequently activates multiple target proteins in cells as a second messenger. Finally, the processes of cell proliferation, differentiation,

survival, etc. are regulated by PI3K²⁸. AKT, also known as protein kinase B (PKB), is an essential target kinase downstream of PI3K. Phosphorylation at the Ser473 site activates AKT, which in turn activates a series of apoptosis-regulated proteins (e.g., Bad, Caspase-9, etc.) to inhibit apoptosis and promote cell survival²⁹. This study aims to investigate the protective role of histamine H3 receptor antagonist in propofol-induced neuronal apoptosis, and the potential mechanism of PI3K/AKT pathway. Our results provide a reference for anesthesia medication in infants.

Materials and Methods

Extraction of Hippocampal Neurons in Rats

This study was approved by the Animal Ethics Committee of Mianyang Central Hospital Animal Center. The neonatal rats with 18-day-old were sacrificed by decapitation. After immersing in 75% alcohol for at least 2 min, the head skin was cut to expose the bilateral cerebral hemispheres. The cerebral hemispheres were placed in D-Hank's buffer on ice for harvesting hippocampal tissues. The remaining meninges, blood vessels and other tissues on the hippocampus were removed and washed with cold D-Hank's. The hippocampus tissues were gently cut and the D-Hank's containing hippocampus tissues were transferred into a centrifuge tube. The mixture was centrifuged at 900 rpm/min for 5 min. The supernatant was discarded and the centrifugation was repeated once with the same procedure. After the supernatant was discarded, 3-time volume of membrane protease was added into the hippocampus tissues, followed by digestion for 15 to 20 min. The mixture was shaken every 5 min. DMED containing 10% FBS was added to terminate the digestion. The filtered cells were collected into a centrifuge tube and centrifuged at 900 rpm/min for 5 min. The supernatant was discarded and the cell suspension was prepared by blowing. The cell suspension was transferred to a culture flask and placed in an incubator for different adherent culture conditions. Non-adherent neurons were harvested subsequently and the glial cells were isolated due to a faster adherence speed.

Extraction of Total Protein From Neurons

The medium containing neurons was discarded and dried with absorbent paper. Pre-

cooled phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) was added in each well for cell wash for a total of three times, with 1 min each time. Neurons were lysed on ice for 30 min and shaken every 3-5 min. After complete lysis, lysate and cell debris were collected in a centrifuge tube, followed by centrifugation at 4°C, 12000 rpm/min for 5 min. The supernatant was collected and preserved in -80°C.

MTT (3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-Diphenyl Tetrazolium Bromide) Assay

Neurons were seeded in 96-well plate at density of 1000-10000 cells per well. Marginal wells were added with PBS. Each group had 5 replicates. After specific treatment, 20 µl of MTT solution (5 mg/mL) was added in each well for 4-h incubation. Subsequently, 150 µL of dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) were added in each well and low-speed oscillation was performed for 10 min. Finally, the optical density was detected at the wavelength of 490 nm.

Western Blot

Neurons were added with lysis buffer and shaken on ice for 30 min. The total protein was separated after the centrifugation at 14,000 g/min for 15 min at 4°C. Protein concentration was calculated by the bicinchoninic acid (BCA) protein assay kit (Pierce, Rockford, IL, USA). The extracted proteins were separated on a 10% sodium dodecyl sulphate-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis (SDS-PAGE) and subsequently transferred to a polyvinylidene difluoride (PVDF) membrane (Millipore, Billerica, MA, USA). Western blot analysis was performed according to standard procedures.

LY294002 Treatment

To explore whether PI3K/AKT pathway was involved in the neuroprotection, neurons were treated with 20 µM LY294002 (PI3K/AKT pathway antagonist) for 30 min prior to Clobenpropit treatment.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed by Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) 22.0 statistical software (IBM, Armonk, NY, USA). The quantitative data were represented as mean \pm standard deviation ($\bar{x} \pm s$). The continuous variables were analyzed by the *t*-test. $p < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

Results

Effects of Propofol on Neuronal Apoptosis

MTT assay was conducted after neurons were exposed to different concentrations of propofol for detecting apoptotic rate. The data showed that the apoptotic rate of neurons remarkably increased in a concentration-dependent manner (Figure 1). Specifically, neurons were induced with 0.1 µM, 1 µM, 10 µM, 100 µM and 1000 µM propofol for 24 hours. Neuronal apoptosis was significantly observed except for those treated with 0.1 µM propofol. In the subsequent experiments, we selected 100 µM propofol as the induction concentration.

Clobenpropit Protected Propofol-Induced Neuronal Apoptosis

To elucidate the potential role of Clobenpropit in propofol-induced neuronal apoptosis, neurons were treated with both 100 µM propofol and different concentrations of Clobenpropit (1 nM, 10 nM and 100 nM). MTT assay elucidated that Clobenpropit treatment significantly protects propofol-induced neuronal apoptosis in a concentration-dependent manner (Figure 2A). In particular, induction of 10 nM Clobenpropit has already exerted significant anti-apoptotic effect. Subsequently, neurons were induced with 100 µM propofol and 100 nM Clobenpropit for 24 h, followed by detection of apoptosis-related genes with Western blot. Protein expressions of cleaved-caspase-3

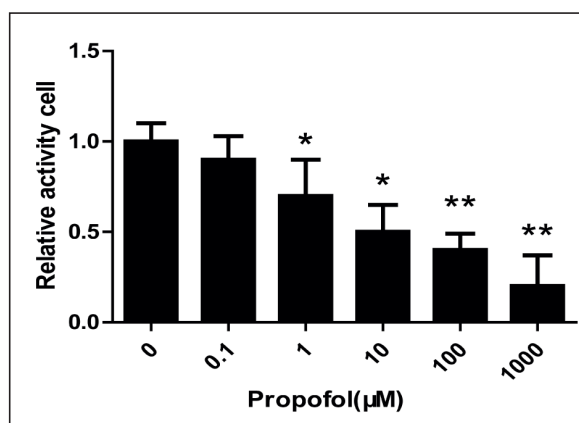


Figure 1. Effects of propofol on neuronal apoptosis. Neurons were induced with 0.1 µM, 1 µM, 10 µM, 100 µM and 1000 µM propofol for 24 hours, followed by MTT assay for detecting apoptotic rate.

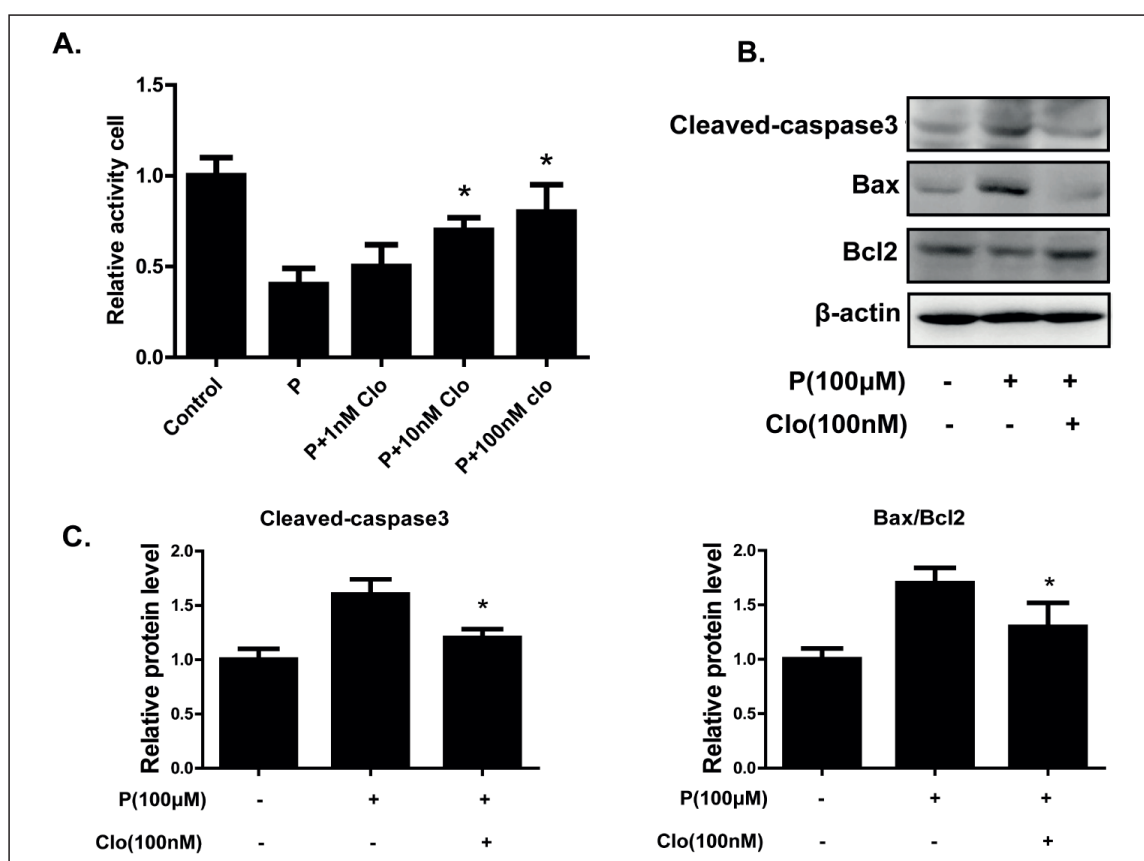


Figure 2. Clobenpropit protected propofol-induced neuronal apoptosis. Neurons were treated with 0 nM, 1 nM, 10 nM and 100 nM, respectively. **A**, Apoptotic rate detected by MTT assay. **B**, **C**, Protein levels of cleaved-caspase-3 and Bax/Bcl2 ($*p < 0.05$).

and Bax/Bcl2 were remarkably downregulated in neurons treated with Clobenpropit (Figure 2B and 2C).

Clobenpropit Treatment Activated PI3K/AKT Pathway In Neurons

To further verify whether PI3K/AKT pathway was involved in the neuroprotective effect of Clobenpropit on propofol-induced neuronal apoptosis, we detected protein levels of PI3K and p-AKT. Compared with those of controls, protein expressions of PI3K and p-AKT decreased in propofol-induced neurons (Figure 3A). By comparison, neurons induced with 100 μM propofol and 100 nM Clobenpropit presented similar levels of PI3K and p-AKT as the baseline (Figure 3B). Subsequently, LY294002, the PI3K pathway antagonist was applied in neurons. As shown in Figure 4, neurons were divided into four groups, namely group 1 (negative controls), group

2 (treated with 100 μM propofol), group 3 (treated with 100 μM propofol and 100 nM Clobenpropit) and group 4 (treated with 100 μM propofol, 100 nM Clobenpropit and 20 μM LY294002). Western blot was conducted for accessing the protein levels of PI3K and p-AKT. It is shown that LY294002 induction remarkably reverses the protective role of Clobenpropit in neuronal apoptosis, manifesting as downregulated PI3K and p-AKT in group 4 compared with those in group 3. It is concluded that Clobenpropit protects propofol-induced neuronal apoptosis through activating PI3K/AKT pathway.

Discussion

Side effects of anesthesia have been revealed in different animal models. Based on previous studies, brain regions involving learning, mem-

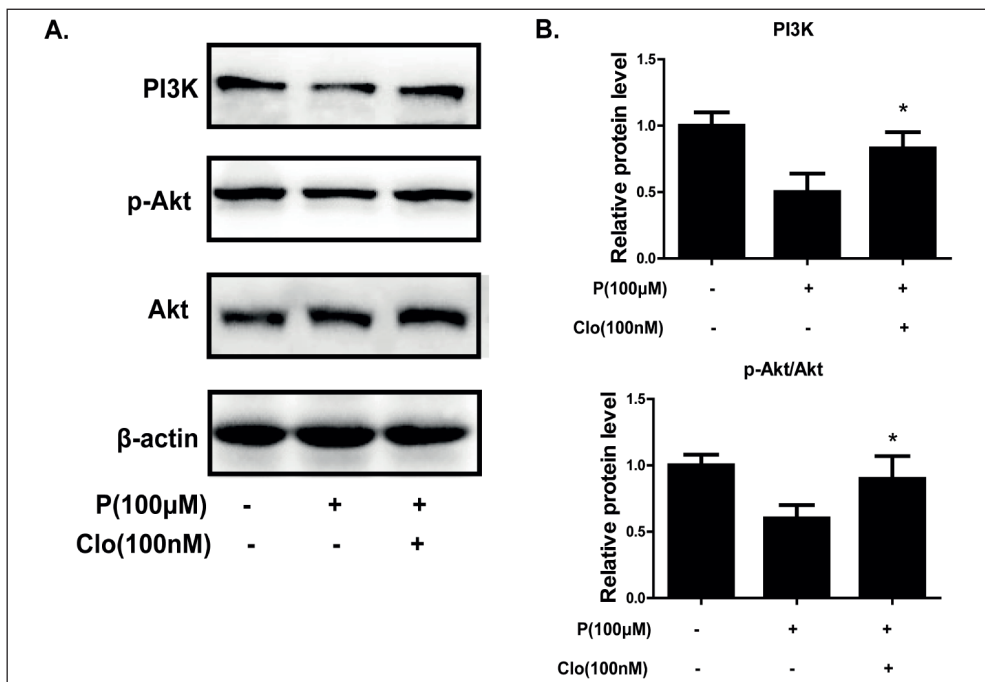


Figure 3. Clobenpropit treatment activated PI3K/AKT pathway in neurons. *A, B*, Protein levels of PI3K and p-AKT in neurons with different treatments ($*p < 0.05$).

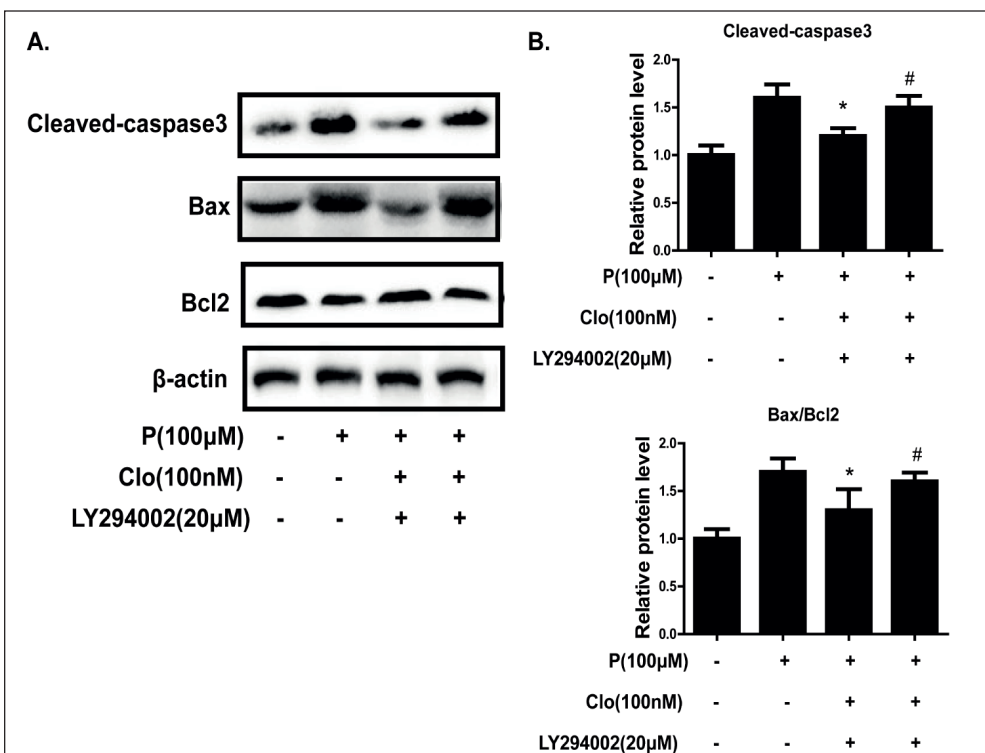


Figure 4. PI3K/AKT pathway in propofol-induced apoptotic neurons. Neurons were divided into group 1 (negative controls), group 2 (treated with 100 μ M propofol), group 3 (treated with 100 μ M propofol and 100 nM Clobenpropit) and group 4 (treated with 100 μ M propofol, 10 nM Clobenpropit and 20 μ M LY294002). Protein levels of PI3K and p-AKT in neurons were detected by Western blot ($*p < 0.05$ compared with group 2, $\#p < 0.05$ compared with group 3).

ory, sensory information processing, and cognitive function are affected by the side effects of anesthetics³⁰. Neuronal damage caused by neuronal apoptosis in these functional areas may impair the development of neuronal networks, leading to long-term decline in neurocognitive function³¹. Anesthesia exposure is capable of inducing apoptosis in different regions of immature brain in different levels. However, only a certain threshold level of neuronal apoptosis in important functional areas may induce behavioral effects, such as hippocampus damage. In the existing studies of impaired learning and memory function, cognitive deficits are mainly related to hippocampus dysfunction. Hippocampal neuronal apoptosis is more severe than those occurring in other sites³². This may be the reason why neuronal apoptosis occurs immediately after anesthesia, and long-term neurocognitive impairment has only been validated in some studies. It is significant to recognize that cognitive impairment is caused by neuronal loss resulted from cell death, not by cell death itself. Propofol is a very useful drug for inducing and maintaining general anesthesia due to its rapid onset and recovery after withdrawal, which has been applied since 1989³³. In the past researches, no serious complications were found during the maintenance or recovery after anesthesia. In addition, propofol has fewer side effects than other anesthetics. However, studies have shown that propofol can induce neurotoxicity in a variety of models in recent years, which has caused concern about the safety of propofol in pediatric anesthesia. With the advancement of medicine, clinical application of pediatric anesthesia has also increased³⁴. Since it is difficult to directly obtain histological evidences of anesthesia neurotoxicity from pediatric patients, more and more studies analyzed the neurotoxicity of anesthetics using stem cell models³⁵. Although the responses of anesthetics in different *in vitro* and *in vivo* models vary a lot, researchers confirmed that propofol administration would lead to axonal retraction and reduced dendritic growth. Clobenpropit, the histamine H3 receptor antagonist, is capable of alleviating NMDA-induced neuronal damage³⁶. Histamine H3 receptor antagonists can negatively regulate the synthesis and release of histamine. They can also exert neuroprotection in a histamine-independent manner³⁷. Due to experimental conditions and time constraints, this study was conducted using *in vitro* neuron model. Further *in vivo* studies

are still required for elucidating the specific molecular mechanism involving in the neuroprotective role of Clobenpropit.

Conclusions

We found that clobenpropit protects propofol-induced neuronal apoptosis through activating PI3K/AKT pathway and it may decrease anesthetics toxic effects.

Conflict of Interest

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

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