

IMMEDIATE COMMUNICATION

Activation of methionine synthase by insulin-like growth factor-1 and dopamine: a target for neurodevelopmental toxins and thimerosal

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Methylation events play a critical role in the ability of growth factors to promote normal development. Neurodevelopmental toxins, such as ethanol and heavy metals, interrupt growth factor signaling, raising the possibility that they might exert adverse effects on methylation. We found that insulin-like growth factor-1 (IGF-1)- and dopamine-stimulated methionine synthase (MS) activity and folate-dependent methylation of phospholipids in SH-SY5Y human neuroblastoma cells, via a PI3-kinase- and MAP-kinase-dependent mechanism. The stimulation of this pathway increased DNA methylation, while its inhibition increased methylation-sensitive gene expression. Ethanol potently interfered with IGF-1 activation of MS and blocked its effect on DNA methylation, whereas it did not inhibit the effects of dopamine. Metal ions potently affected IGF-1 and dopamine-stimulated MS activity, as well as folate-dependent phospholipid methylation: Cu²⁺ promoted enzyme activity and methylation, while Cu⁺, Pb²⁺, Hg²⁺ and Al³⁺ were inhibitory. The ethylmercury-containing preservative thimerosal inhibited both IGF-1- and dopamine-stimulated methylation with an IC₅₀ of 1 nM and eliminated MS activity. Our findings outline a novel growth factor signaling pathway that regulates MS activity and thereby modulates methylation reactions, including DNA methylation. The potent inhibition of this pathway by ethanol, lead, mercury, aluminum and thimerosal suggests that it may be an important target of neurodevelopmental toxins.

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Introduction

Developmental disorders include a spectrum of neurological conditions characterized by deficits in attention, cognition and learning, frequently accompanied by abnormal behaviors. Severe deficits may be recognized at birth, but a failure to achieve standard milestones during initial years of life remains the primary basis of diagnosis in most cases. While the underlying cause(s) remains obscure for many developmental disorders, metabolic abnormalities involving purine synthesis (eg Lesch–Nyhan Syndrome and adenylysuccinate lyase deficiency)^{1,2} or impaired methylation-dependent gene silencing and/or imprinting (Rett and Fragile-X syndromes)^{3,4} suggest biochemical mechanisms that may be in-

involved. The development disorders can also be caused by exposure to toxins (eg ethanol, in fetal alcohol syndrome; heavy metals, in lead poisoning),^{5,6} although the precise mechanisms underlying their toxicity are not known. The recent increase in the incidence of autism has led to the speculation that environmental exposures including vaccine additives (ie aluminum and the ethylmercury-containing preservative thimerosal) might contribute to the triggering of this developmental disorder.⁷

Normal development is closely related to cellular differentiation, and growth factor-initiated signaling promotes differentiation of pluripotent cells.⁸ Furthermore, altered patterns of DNA methylation and associated gene silencing underlie phenotypic differences between undifferentiated and differentiated cells.⁹ Together, these observations suggest that growth factors promote cellular differentiation by producing effects on DNA methylation. This suggestion is reinforced by the observation that

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