

# Induction of metallothionein in mouse cerebellum and cerebrum with low-dose thimerosal injection

Takeshi Minami · Eriko Miyata ·  
Yamato Sakamoto · Hideo Yamazaki · Seiji Ichida

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**Abstract** Thimerosal, an ethyl mercury compound, is used worldwide as a vaccine preservative. We previously observed that the mercury concentration in mouse brains did not increase with the clinical dose of thimerosal injection, but the concentration increased in the brain after the injection of thimerosal with lipopolysaccharide, even if a low dose of thimerosal was administered. Thimerosal may penetrate the brain, but is undetectable when a clinical dose of thimerosal is injected; therefore, the induction of metallothionein (MT) messenger RNA (mRNA) and protein was observed in the cerebellum and cerebrum of mice after thimerosal injection, as MT is an inducible protein. MT-1 mRNA was expressed at 6 and 9 h in both the cerebrum and cerebellum, but MT-1 mRNA expression in the cerebellum was three times higher than that in the cerebrum after the injection of 12 µg/kg thimerosal. MT-2 mRNA was not expressed until 24 h in both organs. MT-3 mRNA was expressed in the cerebellum from 6 to 15 h after

the injection, but not in the cerebrum until 24 h. MT-1 and MT-3 mRNAs were expressed in the cerebellum in a dose-dependent manner. Furthermore, MT-1 protein was detected from 6 to 72 h in the cerebellum after 12 µg/kg of thimerosal was injected and peaked at 10 h. MT-2 was detected in the cerebellum only at 10 h. In the cerebrum, little MT-1 protein was detected at 10 and 24 h, and there were no peaks of MT-2 protein in the cerebrum. In conclusion, MT-1 and MT-3 mRNAs but not MT-2 mRNA are easily expressed in the cerebellum rather than in the cerebrum by the injection of low-dose thimerosal. It is thought that the cerebellum is a sensitive organ against thimerosal. As a result of the present findings, in combination with the brain pathology observed in patients diagnosed with autism, the present study helps to support the possible biological plausibility for how low-dose exposure to mercury from thimerosal-containing vaccines may be associated with autism.

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T. Minami (✉) · E. Miyata · H. Yamazaki  
Department of Life Sciences, School of Science &  
Engineering, Kinki University,  
3-4-1 Kowakae,  
Higashi-osaka, Osaka 577-8502, Japan  
e-mail: minamita@life.kindai.ac.jp

Y. Sakamoto · S. Ichida  
Department of Clinical Pharmacy, School  
of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Kinki University,  
Higashi-osaka, Osaka, Japan

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## Introduction

Thimerosal is used as a preservative agent for vaccines and toxoids (Geier et al. 2007). Thimerosal is divided into two components, thiosalicylate and