Mesopic background lights enhance dark-adapted cone ERG flash responses in the intact mouse retina: a possible role for gap junctional decoupling

(Short title: Mesopic light enhances cone flash responses)

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Keywords: Photoreceptor, retina, rod-cone coupling, light adaptation, electroretinogram
INTRODUCTION

The vertebrate retina is a specialized neural tissue that collects, processes and transmits information about the spatial, spectral and temporal features of the light reaching the eye. Through a range of powerful adaptational mechanisms the retina manages to produce visual information over $10^9$ fold range of light-intensities. The grounds for this impressive performance are laid already at the level of photoreceptor cells, which convey visual messages in darkness, while the higher temporal performance and faster adaptation of daylight vision are based on the function of the cones. However, between these two extremes there is a significant range of light conditions at which these two photoreceptor classes are simultaneously active. In this mesopic range, the neural network of the retina receives light responses from two photoreceptor classes with different sensitivities and temporal properties, calling for adaptational “switches” to facilitate transfer from rod- to cone based vision.

Photoreceptor signals are processed via several parallel pathways in the mammalian retina. In the primary pathways, the rods connect with glutamatergic synapses to depolarizing rod bipolar cells (DBCs) and cones to several types of depolarizing (DBCs) and hyperpolarizing (HBCs) bipolar cells (Kolb and Famiglietti 1974; reviewed by Wässle and Boycott 1991). The primary rod pathway converges to the cone ON and OFF pathways through AII amacrine cells. In addition, mammalian rods connect to the cone pathways at several stages, harnessing them to carry rod-mediated signals. This happens partly by direct gap junctional coupling between the rods and cones in the outer plexiform layer (Macaque and Rabbit: Raviola and Gilula 1973; Cat: Kolb 1977, Nelson 1977; Macaque: Schneeweis and Schnapf 1999; Mouse: Tsukamoto et al. 2001): light-induced hyperpolarization of surrounding rods spreads into the cone pedicles, and is transmitted to DBCs and HBCs via glutamatergic synapses.

In mammalian electroretinogram (ERG), the retinal shift from rod- to cone-dominated action is readily observed when dark-adapted retina is subjected to a steady light. The cone-driven flash responses grow substantially within the first 10 minutes after switching on a rod-saturating background light (Burian 1954; Armington and Biersdorf 1958; Gouras and McKay 1989; Peachey et al. 1993). This includes growth in the a-wave, the b-wave, and the oscillatory potentials, indicating changes at several levels of retinal processing. Also the threshold of cone-driven responses to sinusoidal flicker stimuli decreases (Goldberg et al. 1983). Similar adaptation can be observed in amphibian retinas, and much of it happens postsynaptically from photoreceptors (e.g. Frumkes and Wu 1990). However, the up to 100% growth in the mammalian a-wave remains mostly unexplained. In rats the light-induced growth of the cone photoreceptor component persists in vivo after pharmacological blockade of glutamatergic transmission to second-order neurons (Bui and Fortune 2006), suggesting that it cannot be readily attributed to postsynaptic feedback to cones. It is not clear, though, whether the photoreceptor response growth shown by Bui and Fortune represents true enhancement of cone responses with respect to the dark-adapted state or merely recovery from an initial suppression due to excitation by the background light.

We studied the light-induced growth of preflash-isolated cone ERG flash responses when recorded transretinally across isolated mouse retinas (ex vivo). In this method, the cone stimulating test flash was preceded by an intense preflash. The fast recovery of the cones’ response to the preflash enabled studying their dark- and light-adapted flash responses while the rods remained hyperpolarized and unresponsive. We found that moderate backgrounds expected to induce substantial light adaptation in the phototransduction of rods but not of cones enhanced the cone flash responses with respect to the dark-adapted state. The light-induced growth occurred on a time scale of minutes, and was not
sensitive to the presence of glutamate agonists or antagonists. Experiments with three structurally
independent gap junction blockers suggested that the
growth in cone responses could be mediated by a light-
induced decrease in gap junctional coupling, likely
between rods and cones. The strength of cone response
modulation appears to be directly related to the static
level of rod response compression by the background
light.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Animals

Transretinal ERG was recorded across isolated
retinas of adult C57Bl/6N mice. The use and handling of
the animals were in accordance with the Finland Animal
Welfare Act 1986 and guidelines of the Animal
Experimentation Committee of The University of
Helsinki, Finland.

The electroretinogram recordings

The method for obtaining isolated cone flash
responses was adapted with minor modifications from
Heikkinen et al. (2008). The animals were dark-adapted
overnight and killed with CO2 asphyxiation and cervical
dislocation. The retinas were detached under dim red
light and mounted in a specimen holder distal
(photoreceptor) side upwards. The photoreceptors were
continuously superfused (4.5 ml/min, 36-38 OC) with
modified Ringer's solution containing (in mM): Na+ 135.3; K+ 3.3; Mg2+ 2.0; Ca2+ 1.0; Cl- 124.6, glucose
10.0; EDTA 0.01; Heps 10.0; HCO3- 20.00. The pH
was balanced to 7.5-7.6 with 4.8mM NaOH and the
solution was bubbled with carbogen (95% O2-5% CO2).  

The collection area for a fictitious 100 % M-cone
pigment was calculated by assuming the cone outer segments as cylinders with diameter 1.2 μm, length 13.4 μm (Carter-Dawson and LaVail 1979), and specific absorbance
0.016 μm-1 (Nymark et al. 2005) at λmax (498 nm,
Lyubarsky et al. 1999). This led to an effective
collection area a, rod of 0.73 μm2 for axially incident
light at λmax, with absorption scaled down by 0.69 and
0.5 at the stimulating and background wavelengths 532
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to a, rod = 0.29 μm2 at λmax, lowered by factors 0.85 and
0.68 at 532 nm and 543.5 nm, respectively. In reality, to
come up with the effective collection area for M-
pigment driven cone responses one had to make
estimates about the average percentage of M-cone
pigment in the cones of the central retina, as well as the
shadowing effect due to the rods in our geometry. Mouse
conesA, and S-pigments with maximal absorption at 508 and 355 nm, respectively. There is a gradient in the dorsal-ventral direction regarding the relative proportions of the pigments within individual
cones, as well as the fraction of “S-cones” expressing
almost exclusively the short wavelength pigment. Based
on the data of Applebury et al. (2000) and the
electrophysiological recordings of Nikonov et al. (2006),
we estimated that M-pigment consisted 35 % of the total
cone pigment concentration in the central region of the
retina. This led to a corrective factor 0.4 to a collection
area calculated for purely M-pigment containing cones.
Additionally, the larger and more numerous rods shadow
cones from light entering axially from the distal side of
the retina. Based on the electromicroscopic figures of
Carter-Dawson and LaVail (1979), we came up with

"test flashes" or "preflashes" (in the subsequent text) were
generated from the 532nm laser with a computer-
controlled Oriel shutter (model 76992). The background
lights were produced with the He-Ne nm laser,
controlled with a similar shutter.

Conversion of stimuli to number of isomerized pigments in rods and cones

The 532 and 543.5nm lasers stimulate exclusively
rods and the M-cone pigments in the mouse retina, as the
UV-pigment absorbance is weakened by 7-8 log-units at
these long wavelengths. To convert flash and
background intensities (I_fl, and I_bg, respectively, with
subscript denoting the used wavelength) to activated
rhodopsins per rod (Rh*, P_rod and P_bg, rod) or M-cone
opsins per cone (P*, P_mcone and P_bg, cone), the effective
collection areas for rods and the M-pigment –driven
responses of the cones at the central retina were
calculated for our geometry as in Heikkinen et al.
(2008), and scaled to the stimulus wavelengths with the
templates of Govardovskii et al. (2000).

In brief, the rod outer segments were considered
cylinders with diameter 1.4 μm, length 24 μm (Carter-
Dawson and LaVail 1979), and specific absorbance
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Additionally, the larger and more numerous rods shadow
cones from light entering axially from the distal side of
the retina. Based on the electromicroscopic figures of
Carter-Dawson and LaVail (1979), we came up with
corrective term based on incoming light having to traverse half of the rod OS layer before reaching the small cone outer segments. This shadowing is maximal at wavelengths near the absorption maximum of the rods, when up to 35% of incoming light gets absorbed before reaching the cones. At the stimulating wavelengths 532 nm and 543.5 nm, this corrective term adds up to 0.75 and 0.86, respectively. Thus the overall effective collection area for mouse M-pigment driven cone responses at the central retina was calculated as $a_m = 0.078 \mu m^2$, scaled to 0.078 $\mu m^2$ and 0.069 $\mu m^2$ at the stimulating wavelengths 532 nm and 543.5 nm, respectively.

Isolation of the cone flash responses

Due to the overlapping absorption spectra of murine rods and cones, the distinction between rod and cone flash responses has to be based on the different sensitivities and kinetics of these two cell types. As our aim was to study flash responses originating in the cone photoreceptors at varying levels of dark- and light-adaptation, we could not apply rod saturating backgrounds, such as in e.g. Nikonov et al. 2006. Instead, we isolated the cone flash responses with a rod-saturating preflash producing 150 000 - 260 000 Rh*.

The preflash-test stimulus interval (typically 500 ms) was chosen to allow cone responses to recover from the preflash while the rods remained unresponsive (Heikkilä et al. 2006, see also Figs. 2 and 3). The 2 min interval between preflash-test stimulus pairs in darkness was sufficient to allow also rods to regain their sensitivity and kinetics before subsequent stimulation. This way we could record cone responses in a nominally “dark-adapted” state (the preflash-test stimulus pair was presented on the dark-adapted retina), as well as in a “light-adapted” state (the preflash–test stimulus pair was superimposed on a steady background light). The flash responses shown in the figures are averages of 2-5 trials, while the amplitude data were collected from individual flash responses.

RESULTS

Mesopic background lights enhance the preflash-isolated mouse cone flash responses

The preflash-isolated, cone-driven ERG flash responses recorded ex vivo from the dark-adapted mouse retina (gray traces in Fig. 1A and B) are dominated by the positive-going b-wave, that originates in the mGluR6-mediated pathway through the ON-bipolar cells (Knapp and Schiller 1984; Stockton and Slaughter 1989; Masu et al. 2006). The b-wave is preceded by the negative a-wave, which originates in the light-reponses of photoreceptors and the OFF-pathway (Bush and Sieving 1994; Shirato et al. 2008). The amplitudes and times to peak of the b-waves are comparable to those observed in corneally recorded ERG immediately after applying a rod saturating background upon a previously dark-adapted retina (e.g. Peachey et al. 1993, Ekesten et al. 1998). The waveform is distinctly round and lacks strong oscillatory components that originate in the inner retina and are routinely observed in the ERG registered in vivo. A steady background light of $I_{bg} = 4800 h_{543.5}$ um $\mu m^{-2}s^{-1}$ arriving from the photoreceptor side induces a prominent growth in the a- and b-waves of the preflash-isolated responses, accompanied by the appearance of oscillatory potentials (black traces in Fig. 1A and B).

This suggests that several stages in the cone-signaling pathway are released to mediate signals under these mesopic conditions, after an initially suppressed state in the dark-adapted retina. When superimposed and plotted on an expanded time scale to reveal the amplitude and time course of the a-wave more clearly (Fig. 1B), it appears that despite the notable increase in the a-wave amplitude, the dark- and light-adapted flash responses share a common path during the first milliseconds and diverge only at later times.

The light-induced growth of the cone flash responses is not inhibited by disrupting glutamatergic signaling to second-order neurons

To study the photoreceptor component of the cone-driven responses (Fig. 2A), 20 $\mu M$ DL-AP4 (Slaughter and Miller 1981) and 10 $\mu M$ NBQX (Yu and Miller 1993) were used to prevent transmission mediated by metabotropic glutamate and AMPA/kainate receptors, respectively. This revealed the negative, longer lasting photoreceptor flash responses (fast PIII, black traces in Fig. 2A. Note the longer time course of the response in Fig. 2A after the b-wave was eliminated, compared to the response in Fig. 1B in which the b-wave masks the later portion of the a-wave). Figure 2B plots the preflash-isolated photoreceptor responses superimposed on the response to the preflash only. The prolonged saturation of the rods following the bright preflash can be readily observed after blockade of synaptic transmission, indicating that the test flash response originates mainly in cones.

A steady background of $I_{bg} = 3300 h_{543.5}$ um $\mu m^{-2}s^{-1}$ ($\Phi_{bg,cone} = 230 P*s^{-1}$ and $\Phi_{bg,rod} = 1200 Rh*s^{-1}$, Fig. 2C) enhanced the pharmacologically isolated test flash responses similarly to the a-wave in Fig. 1B: the early activation phase of the responses remained unchanged, while the rest of the response was altered. The recovery phase of the background-enhanced responses was typically steeper than in the dark-adapted state, and a positive overshoot appeared in many retinas. In control experiments, the NMDA receptor antagonist D-AP5 (10 $\mu M$, 2 retinas, data not shown) had no further effect on the photoreponses. Increasing the concentrations of both DL-AP4 and NBQX 4-fold, up to 80 and 40 $\mu M$, respectively, did not affect the light-induced growth of the test flash responses, nor did the glutamate agonist L-aspartate (data not shown). The results suggest that the induction of the response growth in the preflash-isolated cone photoreceptor responses does not require glutamate-mediated transmission from photoreceptors to the second-order neurons.
Cone flash responses can be isolated with a rod-saturating preflash also in a moderately light-adapted retina.

Our method for isolating cone flash responses relies on the prolonged saturation of rod phototransduction after the preflash (Fig. 2B). This method has been widely used for isolating cone flash responses in the dark-adapted ERGs of many species, including mouse (reviewed e.g. by Wymouth and Vingrys 2008). In the present work, we expand this method to retinas that have been adapted to mesopic backgrounds (Fig. 2C).

However, the rods adapt to background lights through desensitization, which also decreases the time they remain saturated following a bright flash of fixed intensity. Thus the observed growth in the preflash isolated cone responses could in principle not originate in cones at all, but rather trivially arise from partial recovery of the rods’ responsiveness between the preflash and the cone-stimulating flash. Therefore we investigated how the compromised rod saturation time in the light-adapted retina affected the measured “cone response” to the second stimulus.

Fig. 3A shows pharmacologically isolated photoreceptor responses to the rod saturating preflash, delivered without a subsequent cone stimulating flash. The traces portray a typical rod response saturation both in the dark- and moderately light-adapted retina (grey and black traces, respectively), apparently lasting well over the time our test flash is typically presented (indicated with the dotted line). Since the rod responses are about tenfold larger than the cone responses, even a minor fraction of regained rod responsiveness between flashes in the light-adapted retina could account for the observed significant growth in the responses to the test stimulus (Fig. 3B). We investigated this possibility by recording responses to the test flash at varying times ($\Delta t$) following the preflash (Fig. 3C). The gray traces present responses recorded from a dark-adapted retina with 300-2000 ms intervals between the preflash and the test flash. The responses maintain constant amplitude up to $\Delta t > 600$ ms. After this they are progressively contaminated by a presumably rod-originated component that increases gradually with increasing stimulus interval. The responses recorded from the same retina under light-adaptation (black traces, same background as in Fig. 3A) also maintain fixed amplitude (and thus no apparent component due to rod responsivity) beyond the time of our regular stimulation, 500 ms. Yet the photoresponse to the test stimulus remains larger than in the dark-adapted state throughout the interstimulus interval range investigated, indicating a true growth in the cone flash responses. Similar results were obtained in all experiments with the same protocol (3 retinas).

The data of figure 4A show how the cone responses are gradually enhanced at increasing backgrounds, with the steady state level of enhancement correlating with the steady level of rod response suppression by each background. Yet there is no instantaneous one to one relation between the rod and cone response amplitudes: the time course of the enhancement is rather slow; taking several minutes to complete after a background is turned on. This observation is in line with the rate of photopic growth in vivo (cf. Peachey 1993).

A time series of light responses such as presented in Fig. 4 does not allow accurate determination of the time scale of the cone response enhancement. Tracing the time course during the first seconds of light-adaptation would necessitate repeated stimuli that may themselves...
Flash trains designed to light-adapt and suppress light responses only in rods induce growth in the cone flash responses

The cone response growth is initiated by relatively dim background lights that are not expected to cause adaptational changes in the cone phototransduction machinery. This suggests that the enhancement of the cone flash responses might be triggered by the adaptive or suppressive changes the background light causes in the rods. Or alternately, cone flash responses may be somehow suppressed through rod function in darkness, and released from this suppression by light.

The rods and M-cones of the mouse retina have similar action spectra (Lyubarsky et al. 1999) and their contribution to the ERG signal cannot be distinguished by varying the spectral composition of the stimulus. However, we attempted to light-adapt the rods selectively by using high intensity flash trains with 1 s interflash intervals: This interval is sufficiently small for the rods to be driven into partial saturation by the flash train. Yet cone flash responses recover between subsequent flashes (Fig. 4). Fig. 6 shows the cone and rod amplitudes in a typical flash train experiment. The responses were first recorded in dark-adapted conditions to ensure a steady baseline. A background light $\Phi_{bg, cone} = 230 \text{P}^*\text{s}^{-1}$ was then applied for ca. 20 minutes, leading into typical rod suppression and cone response enhancement with a series of experiments in which individual pairs of preflash and cone stimulus were delivered at variable times following a step of background light; to allow tracking the time course of the cone response growth, the retina was allowed to dark-adapt between subsequent steps. Figure 5 shows the average time course of cone response growth in four retinas in response to a background light sufficient to reduce the rod circulating current by approximately half. The average time course can be fitted well with a single exponential with $\tau = 80$ s, but there is considerable variability regarding the steepness of the curve, as is evident from the large scatter in the data (apparent as large SEM) near 60 s. No change was ever observed in the cone responses during the first second following the background onset.

Disrupting gap junctional coupling in the retina enhances dark-adapted cone responses similarly to background light

The graded growth of the cone responses at relatively low backgrounds or with rod-suppressing flash trains suggests a link between cone enhancement and rod suppression by the background lights. The hypothetical secondary rod pathway, i.e. gap junctional coupling between rods and cones provides a possible route for rod influence on the cone system that persists when postsensorial feedback is inhibited. We explored this possibility with three structurally unrelated compounds that have been used as potent gap junction blockers: carbenoxolone (CBX; Davidson et al. 1986), octanol (Johnston et al. 1980) and meclofenamic acid (MFA). MFA has recently been shown to reversibly remove electrical and dye coupling between cells connected with Cx43 gap junctions (Harks et al. 2002), dye coupling between retinal cells connected with Cx36, Cx50 and Cx57 gap junctions (Pan et al. 2007), and electrical coupling between amacrine cells connected with Cx36 gap junctions (Veruki and Hartveit 2009, Veruki et al. 2010). Figs. 7A and B compare the effects of light and MFA on the dark-adapted cone flash responses. Panel A presents cone photoresponses in dark-adapted state (gray traces) and following 3-5 minutes adaptation to maintained background light ($I_{bg} = 4600 \text{h}V_{545,500} \text{m}^2\text{s}^{-1}$, black traces), sufficient to suppress 60% of the rod saturated response. This background enhanced the cone responses substantially, yet reversibly, as shown in the amplitude data of panels C and D. Fig. 7B shows the cone responses from the same retina to the same stimuli in the dark-adapted state before (gray traces) and during the application of 50 $\mu$M MFA (black traces). MFA induced similar growth of the cone flash responses as the previously applied background light. Application of background light did not enhance response further in the presence of MFA (light gray traces). Both the original dark-adapted cone response amplitudes and the ability to induce response growth with background lights were gradually recovered when MFA was removed from the superfusion (Fig. 7C).

In experiments similar to that shown in Fig. 4, the saturated cone responses maintained their constant steady state amplitudes up to backgrounds producing $\Phi_{bg, cone} = 10,000 \text{P}^*\text{s}^{-1}$ (Fig. 7D). The apparent decrease of the response amplitude at stronger backgrounds is due to desensitization of cone phototransduction: the actual saturated amplitude was not affected, as seen from the amplitudes of responses to yet larger stimuli ($\Phi_{cone} = 83,000 \text{P}^*$, marked by stars in 7D). In control experiments (data not shown), application of MFA on light-adapted retinas did not generate growth or substantial waveform changes in the cone responses, instead it decreased the amplitudes slightly.

The more commonly used gap junction antagonist, CBX (100 $\mu$M) also prevented light-induced enhancement of cone responses. However, it decreased cone flash sensitivity ca. 10-fold, slowed their photoresponses and diminished the response amplitudes.
by more than 50%. This is consistent with recent reports
that besides its potency on blocking gap junctions, CBX
exerts several non-specific inhibitory effects on neuronal
signaling, including retinal function (Tovar et al. 2009).
The third structurally unrelated gap junction blocker,
octanol (1mM) enhanced dark-adapted cone flash
responses similarly to MFA, with no further growth
when background light was applied. Neither octanol nor
MFA affected the dark-adapted cone sensitivity
differently from the light-induced enhancement. Also
rod response compression with background light was
similar in the presence of these two compounds,
although octanol reduced the rod (but not cone) response
amplitudes somewhat. The effects of the three gap
junction blockers on the dark- and light-adapted cone
response amplitudes, normalized to the dark-adapted
amplitude before their administration, are shown in Fig.
8.

DISCUSSION

The light-induced growth in photopic ERG is a robust phenomenon that has been known and studied for
several decades, although its cellular and molecular
origins have remained unresolved. It has also been
unknown, whether the growth represents enhancement
of the cone responses with respect to the dark-adapted
state or adaptation/repolarization after an initial
suppression by the photopic background. Our results
indicate that much of the photopic growth arises as a true
enhancement of the responses when compared to the
dark-adapted state. It also appears that in the mouse
retina, its graded appearance correlates with the level of
rod stimulation by the background.

Origins of the light-induced growth in cone flash
responses

The persistence of light-induced growth in the cone
photoresponse after repressing glutamatergic synaptic
transmission to higher-order neurons indicates adaptive
changes in the cone impulse response, as recorded with
the ERG. This may involve either adaptation in the cone
phototransduction machinery, or in the way its impulse
response is transformed into the membrane voltage
response and how it is reflected in the inner segment
curves (which indirectly give rise to the ERG signal).
The response growth appears already at relatively dim
backgrounds and can also be induced by relatively low
frequency flash trains (Figs. 4 and 6), so that modulation
of the cone phototransduction process itself as a key
factor seems unlikely. The role of interphotoreceptor
coupling in this phenomenon has not been explicitly
addressed before the present study, but also some earlier
data suggest that rod-cone interaction may be involved
in it. In human multifocal ERG, the growth of the
photopic ERG upon introducing rod-suppressing
background light is strongest in the rod-dominated
peripheral retina (Kondo et al. 1999). Also in the rodless
(Nrl−/− and Rho−/−) mouse models and in the Gnat1−/−
mouse lacking rod phototransduction, the photopic
growth is significantly altered when compared to WT
animals (Tanikawa et al. 2004; Cameron and Lucas
2009). The current results suggest that cone flash
responses of the mouse retina are indeed suppressed in
darkness, and support the idea that this suppression is
gradually removed as rods are progressively saturated by
light.

To date, electrical coupling between mammalian rods and cones has been functionally shown in cat and
macaque (Nelson 1977; Schneeweis and Schnapf 1999),
but only indirectly in mouse, through the appearance of
small gap junction–like contacts between rod spherules
and cone pedicles in electron microscopic graphs
(Tsukamoto et al. 2001). We have shown that two pharmacological agents that block gap junctions (i.e.,
MFA and octanol) increased cone ERG response size in
dark-adapted retinas to a similar extent as that of
mesopic background light and prevented additional
enhancement by background light. Carbenoxolone,
which also blocks gap junctions, decreased cone ERG
response size in dark-adapted retinas and prevented
enhancement of cone ERG response size by background
illumination. As with any pharmacological approach,
we cannot conclusively rule out all non-specific effects
of the compounds used as gap junction blockers.
However, the finding that all three of the structurally
different gap junction blockers appear to prevent the
light-induced growth speaks in favor of the effect being
mediated through their common effect on gap junctions.

Concurrently, a number of facts speak against
feedback or other contribution from the postreceptoral
neurons. The glutamatergic transfer of photoreceptor
signals was pharmacologically prevented, or at least
greatly suppressed in our experiments. Thus a light-
induced feedback stemming from the basic glutamatergic
routes of the retina seems unlikely.

Specifically, the horizontal cell light responses of the
macaque retina are abolished by a lower dose (5µM) of
NBQX (Dunn et al. 2007). Also in the rabbit retina, the
light responses of A-type horizontal cells are completely
eliminated in a HEPES-buffered superfuse lacking
bicarbonate (Hanitzsch and Küppers 2001), which
treatment also failed to prevent light-induced cone
response growth in our control experiments (data not
shown). Due to the homogenous full-field stimuli used
in this study, cone-cone coupling should not contribute
to the observed light-induced growth. Further, the
background intensities sufficient to initiate release of
cone suppression are too low to be expected to stimulate
the melanopsin-containing ganglion cells (ipRGCs) in
the inner retina (Berson et al. 2002; Tu et al. 2005; Do et
al. 2008). Specifically, the threshold for an electrical
light response in the ipRGCs has been found to be ca.
1000-1500 hν µm−2 s−1 at 480nm (Do et al. 2008), which
corresponds to > 8000 hν µm−2 s−1 at 543.5 nm in our
recording geometry (in which almost half of the
incoming light is absorbed by rod outer segments before
reaching the inner retina). The cone response growth is
observed already at much lower intensities and is almost
maximal at this light level.
Rod-cone coupling and modulation of the cone flash responses in the mesopic range

There are several ways in which closing the gap junctions between rods and cones could affect the ERG light-response originating in the cones, but the most straightforward explanation lies on direct electrical coupling between the cells. Gap junctions between rod terminals and cone pedicles enable rods to connect to cone bipolar cells in mammals. Due to the higher sensitivity of rods, cone light responses are superimposed on hyperpolarization spreading through rod-cone gap junctions (Nelson 1977; Schneeweis and Schnapf 1999). There is little difference in the absorption spectra of the rhodopsin and M-cone pigment in the mouse retina, so that rods are strongly hyperpolarized every time the cones activate in the dark-adapted retina. Closing rod-cone gap junctions at rodsaturating light levels would serve to remove this hyperpolarization, and allow cone-originated signals the full functional range of synaptic transmission.

It is worth to note here that the process of cone response growth is rather slow, initiated seconds after the background onset and requiring minutes to reach full effect (see Fig. 5 inset). Thus it can be induced only with relatively long-lasting light stimulation and cannot be driven by the short-lived hyperpolarization induced in rods by the single bright preflashes used in our recording protocol. We would also like to point out, that we observe correlation between the steady state level of rod amplitude suppression and cone response amplitude growth. This does not mean that cone response growth should be directly linked to the rod membrane potential; given the relatively slow time scale of the phenomenon it seems even unlikely. Because background illumination-induced cone response size enhancement takes several minutes to reach full effect (Fig. 5), but transjunctional voltage-induced changes in gap junctional conductance typically take hundreds of milliseconds to seconds to occur (Harris, 2001), it seems likely that cone response enhancement by mesopic backgrounds does not result from a direct rod hyperpolarization-induced decrease in rod-cone gap junctional conductance, but rather that the hyperpolarization of rods initiates a more slowly acting mechanism that results in cone response enhancement. Thus, it seems plausible to search for the molecular mechanism(s) in the light-induced metabolic changes within the rods. While the present work does not extend to clarifying the precise molecular pathway, one possible route is discussed below.

About the molecular mechanisms behind cone response suppression / enhancement

The level of rod-cone coupling in some teleosts and mammals has been shown to be regulated by the circadian clock in the retina (Ribelayga et al. 2008): rod signals are allowed to mix with the cone pathway at night, while the connection is closed during the day time. In addition, evidence suggests that there is a circadian clock in rods and cones that can be acutely affected by rod hyperpolarization and that the actions of the retinal clock are independent of glutamatergic transmission (Iuvone et al., 2005).

We found mesopic background lights to modulate cone ERG flash responses in a highly reversible manner, during a time scale of minutes. The degree of modulation of the cone responses was related to the background light intensity, and similar modulation was initiated by substances commonly used to decrease gap junctional coupling between adjoining cells. These findings are consistent with the idea that gap junctional coupling between rods and cones is modulated by background light, implying a relatively fast and reversible modulation of the connectivity between rod and cone pathways by light. Our experiments were typically started 2-3 hours before the lights were switched on during the 12/12h light cycle our mice were housed under. Thus, in principle, our findings are in concordance with the idea of circadially regulated rod-cone coupling - it would seem intuitively plausible that also during night-time the gap junctional conductance could be modulated by light-exposure. However, we did not specially investigate the effect of circadian rhythm on the phenomenon.

In a very recent work, Ribelayga and Mangel (2010) show that circadian clock modulates the extent of dye coupling between rods and cones in the rabbit retina through dopamine acting on D2 receptors on the rod plasma membrane. The exact molecular route of how activation of the dopamine receptors leads to decoupling of the gap junctions is not yet known in mammals. In teleosts, the process has been reported to advance through cAMP-dependent protein kinase A activity and phosphorylation of the connexin proteins (Li et al. 2009). The cAMP-level in the mammalian photoreceptors can be regulated independently by exogenous dopamine or light (Cohen and Blazynski 1990, Nir et al. 2002). This allows for the enticing hypothesis that similar molecular mechanisms within the rods operate behind circadian and light-induced regulation of rod-cone coupling even though the triggering signal may be different for the two phenomena.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The present address of Dr S. Nymark is: Department of Physiology and Biophysics, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, Massachusetts 02118. We thank Teemu Turunen and Marja Pitkanen for their assistance in conducting part of the experiments.

GRANTS

This project was supported by the Academy of Finland (Grants 111866 and 128081) and International
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FIG. 1. Continuous background lights enhance cone-driven flash responses. (A) Preflash-isolated cone response families to 2 ms flashes administered at $t = 0$ s, stimulus strength $\Phi_{\text{cone}} = 18, 250, 1900$ and 26000 P*, recorded from a dark-adapted retina (above) and from the same retina following 10 min adaptation to background light $I_{\text{bg}}$ = 4800 h$\nu_{543.5nm}$ $\mu$m$^2$s$^{-1}$ ($\Phi_{\text{bg, cone}}$ = 330 P*s$^{-1}$, below). No glutamate agonists/antagonists were present in the superfusion. (B) The dark- and light-adapted responses of (A) superimposed and drawn on a shorter timescale to reveal changes in the a-wave more clearly.

FIG. 2. Light induced growth of the prefraction-isolated cone flash responses persists after pharmacological isolation of the photoreceptor responses. (A) The cone flash responses ($\Phi_{\text{cone}} = 250$ and 26000 P*) recorded from dark-adapted retina before and after pharmacological blockade of glutamatergic signaling to metabotrophic and AMPA/kainate receptors (gray and black traces, respectively). Disrupting glutamatergic transmission with 20 $\mu$M dl-AP4 and 10 $\mu$M NBQX reveals the negative cone photoreceptor responses. (B) Pharmacological isolation of the photoreceptor responses reveals the prolonged rod saturation following the intense preflash ($\Phi_{\text{rod}} = 220 000$ Rh* at time $t = 0$ s). The responses to the test flash ($\Phi_{\text{cone}} = 30$ and 38000 P*, stimulus onset at $t = 0.5$ s) are superimposed to the saturated rod plateau. The cone responses isolated by subtracting the response to preflash presented alone are depicted with light gray traces. The measures used for saturated amplitudes of both rods and cones are indicated with arrows. (C) A mesopic background suppressing ca. one third of the rod response amplitude in the retina of panel (B) initiates growth in the test flash responses. For comparison, the dark-adapted cone responses to the same stimuli (same responses as in panel B) are drawn (light gray traces) superimposed to the isolated light-adapted test flash responses (dark gray traces).

FIG. 3. Recovery of rod responsiveness after the preflash does not explain cone response enhancement at mesopic backgrounds. (A) The pharmacologically isolated photoreceptor response to the rod-saturating preflash ($\Phi_{\text{rod}} = 180 000$ Rh*) presented to the dark-adapted (gray trace) and moderately light-adapted (black trace, $\Phi_{\text{bg,rod}} = 1300$ Rh*s$^{-1}$) retina. No test flash was administered after the preflash, but the usual moment of its delivery (500ms) in the cone response experiments is depicted with a dashed line. (B) The responses to test flashes ($\Phi_{\text{cone}} = 290$ and 30 000 P*) following the preflashes delivered to the retina of (A) in the dark-adapted (gray) and light-adapted state (black). (C) The responses to test flashes delivering $\Phi_{\text{cone}} = 26000$ P* were recorded from another retina in a dark-adapted (gray traces) and light-adapted state (black traces), $\Phi_{\text{bg,rod}} = 650$ Rh*s$^{-1}$, $\Phi_{\text{bg,cone}} = 130$ P*S$^{-1}$) at varying times (300-2000 ms) following a rod-saturating preflash. The responses in panel (C) have been digitally low-pass filtered (FFT, $\nu=200$Hz) to avoid clutter in the figure.

FIG. 4. Background light induces graded growth in the prefraction-isolated cone flash responses. (A) dl-AP4/NBQX-isolated cone responses to flashes producing $\Phi_{\text{cone}} = 250$ and 26000 P* in darkness (gray traces) and following 10 min exposure to background light ($\Phi_{\text{bg,cone}} = 320$ P*s$^{-1}$, black traces). (B) Gray traces depict the same dark-adapted cone flash responses as in (A), compared to the those recorded following 10 min adaptation to a 10-fold stronger background ($\Phi_{\text{bg,cone}} = 3200$ P*s$^{-1}$, black traces) (C) The saturated cone response amplitudes ($\Phi_{\text{cone}} = 26 000$ P*) from the same retina as in A and B during an experiment in which dark-adapted state was followed by backgrounds with intensity increasing stepwise from 150 to 460000 h$\nu_{543.5nm}$ $\mu$m$^2$s$^{-1}$ ($10$ to $32000$ P*s$^{-1}$), as depicted above the amplitude data. (D) The rod plateau amplitudes, determined 400 ms after the rod-saturating preflash ($\Phi_{\text{rod}} = 150 000$ Rh*), during the light adaptation experiment in (C).

FIG. 5. The cone response growth develops within minutes after application of the adapting light ($\Phi_{\text{bg,cone}} = 260$ P*S$^{-1}$, corresponding to 1300 Rh*s$^{-1}$ in rods). The normalized growth in the amplitude of the saturated, pharmacologically isolated responses relative to the dark-adapted state was probed at variable times following the onset of the background light. For background durations < 60 s, each data point was collected as a separate trial in which a background light step was followed by the combination of preflash and cone stimulating flash. The time on x-axis designates the moment of cone stimulating flash delivery, relative to the onset of the background light step. The retina was dark-adapted between subsequent background light steps. For background durations > 60 s, the background light was left on and additional responses were collected at 180, 300 and 500 s after the background onset. The dashed line depicts an exponential with time constant of 80 s fitted to the data averaged from 4 retinas, error bars depicting SEM. The inset shows the same data on a semi-logarithmic scale.

FIG. 6. Rod-suppressing flash trains enhance cone flash responses similarly to background light. Cone (above, filled circles) and rod (below, open circles) response amplitudes during an experiment in which first steady background light ($\Phi_{\text{bg,cone}} = 230$ P*S$^{-1}$) and then a 1Hz train of intense flashes (250 000 Rh*, same as the preflash) were applied on a previously dark-adapted retina in the presence of dl-AP4 and NBQX. The photoreceptors were allowed to regain dark-adapted sensitivity
and response amplitudes between the 20 min background and the 1 min flash train. During the gaps in the response amplitude
data, responses to low intensity flashes were collected. The inset shows the preflash-isolated cone flash responses to $\Phi_{cone} = 30, 400$ and $42000$ P* recorded in darkness (gray traces), and following adaptation to the steady background (black traces) as well as the responses to the two most intense flashes recorded 1-2 minutes after ending the flash train (light gray traces).

FIG. 7. Meclofenamic acid enhances dark-adapted cone photoresponses and prevents further enhancement by background lights. (A), DL-AP4/NBQX -isolated cone responses to $\Phi_{cone} = 250$ and 26 000 P* in darkness (gray) and after 3-5 minutes of exposure to background $\Phi_{Bg,cone} = 320$ P*s$^{-1}$. (B), Responses from the same retina to the same stimuli in darkness after recovery from exposure to the background light (gray), 20 min after applying 50 $\mu$M meclofenamic acid (black), and following 8 minutes of subsequent adaptation to background light $\Phi_{Bg,cone} = 320$ P*s$^{-1}$ (light gray). (C) The saturated cone response amplitude (black squares in the upper panel, $\Phi_{cone} = 30 000$ P*) in darkness, during a short exposure to a moderate background of $\Phi_{Bg,cone} = 260$ P*s$^{-1}$ and subsequent dark-adaptation, followed by administration and washout of 50 $\mu$M MFA. At 80 minutes, the reversibility of the MFA-generated enhancement was tested by reapplying the background light. The lower panel presents the saturated rod response amplitudes (open circles) during the same experiment. The dotted line above the rod data (at ca. 41-50 mins) indicates a period during which small stimulus cone response data was collected with lowered interstimulus intervals, temporarily decreasing the rod amplitudes. The rod response amplitudes during this higher frequency sequence are not included in the figure. (D) The normalized cone response amplitude (dots: $\Phi_{cone} = 26 000$ P*; stars: 83 000 P*) in darkness, during (at around 20 min) and after short exposure to a moderate background of $\Phi_{Bg,cone} = 320$ P*s$^{-1}$ in Ringer’s solution. 50 $\mu$M MFA was added after recovery of dark-adapted amplitudes, as indicated by the arrow above data. The retina was then exposed to incremental adapting backgrounds ranging from 320 to 63000 P*s$^{-1}$, as depicted below the data.

FIG. 8. The saturated cone response amplitudes ($\Phi_{cone} = 26 000$ P*) in darkness and under background light (2600 - 3200 P*s$^{-1}$, following 8-10 min adaptation) in Ringer’s solution (5 retinas) and after administration of three pharmacological gap junction blockers: meclofenamic acid (MFA, 50 $\mu$M, 5 retinas), octanol (Oct, 1mM, 3 retinas) and carbenoxolone (CBX, 100 $\mu$M, 3 retinas). Values normalized to the amplitude in darkness before exposure to background light or gap junction blockers. The error bars depict SEM between the retinas.
A

B

C

Flash response (μV)

Time (s)

Flash response (μV)

Time (s)

Flash response (μV)

Time (s)

"Dark-adapted"

"Light-adapted"
Flash train, 1Hz

Dark Background

Rod $R_{sat}$ (µV)

Cone $R_{sat}$ (µV)

Time (s)

$\text{IBg}=230$ P*$s^{-1}$

Dark, following flash train

Flash response (µV)

Time (min)

$230$ P*$s^{-1}$