

Chapter 17

Sex Hormones

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Millions of women suffer migraine headaches around the time of their menstrual cycles, a phenomenon known as *menstrual migraine*. Clinical studies completed over 25 years ago established strong links between falling blood estrogen levels and triggering of these attacks (126,127). This chapter addresses current knowledge of likely mechanisms linking hormones to migraine in both the peripheral and central nervous systems.

Migraine and other pain disorders, including fibromyalgia and temporomandibular disorders, are at least twice as prevalent in women as in men (34,73,76,128,156). In these conditions, severity of pain varies with the menstrual cycle, peaking around the time of menstruation when both estrogen and progesterone are lowest (54). Onset of migraine in girls usually occurs around time of menarche (128), and the frequency and severity of migraine attacks often increases during menopause, when hormone levels fluctuate. After menopause, when hormone levels are low, many migraineurs experience improvement (38). The constant high hormone levels of pregnancy are also associated with a decrease in migraine frequency (143). Thus, migraine improves during pregnancy, when estrogen levels are constantly high, and after menopause, when estrogen levels are constantly low. All of these observations indicate a strong link between ovarian steroids and migraine, and they suggest that rapid changes in estrogen and progesterone levels are a trigger for attacks. Ovarian steroids act via classical nuclear receptors such as ER α and ER β , which regulate transcription by activating or repressing estrogen-responsive genes. Estrogen also activates elements of the MAP kinase pathway including extracellular-signaling related kinases (ERKs) (90). Other, more rapid effects of estrogen may be mediated via membrane estrogen receptors (70). Progesterone has two nuclear receptors, PR-A and PR-B, which are identical except for an additional 164 amino acids at the N-terminal end of PR-B (42). Progesterone also acts via membrane effects (144).

Hormones could affect pain processing at all levels, including peripheral and central mechanisms. Figure 17-1

diagrams regions where hormones could influence transmission of pain information from the peripheral into the central nervous system.

Peripheral Tissue

Meningeal Inflammation

Throbbing pain suggests an origin in arteries, and it has been known for many years that meningeal and large cerebral arteries are capable of transmitting painful sensations. Thus, studies of migraine pathogenesis have focused on meninges and meningeal vessels, and it is thought that migraine involves meningeal inflammation (95). There are at least four potential mechanisms whereby ovarian steroids could modulate meningeal inflammation. First, meningeal vessels are a potential site of estrogen effects, as they express estrogen receptor- α , which increases after estrogen treatment (129). Second, hormones may alter responses of meningeal mast cells. Estrogen receptors in dural mast cells modulate histamine release (109), and histamine excites nociceptive terminals. Third, estrogen may modulate expression of proinflammatory cytokines by macrophages present on the meningeal linings of the subarachnoid space (87) and in the dura, where they are aligned along blood vessels, especially near the superior sagittal sinus (85). Proinflammatory cytokines also excite nociceptive terminals (153). Estrogen modulates expression of proinflammatory cytokines in macrophages (68) and reduces leukocyte migration into injured vessels (153). Fourth, ovarian steroids may regulate sensory sensitization by modulating expression of nerve growth factor (NGF). Retrograde transport of receptor-bound NGF stimulates synthesis of CGRP, substance P, and PACAP (71,72,96). Blocking the high-affinity NGF receptor trkA prevents sensory sensitization following inflammation (14,64). Dural tissue expresses NGF (134), and estrogen treatment alters NGF expression in some tissues (16). Effects of NGF on meninges are unknown.

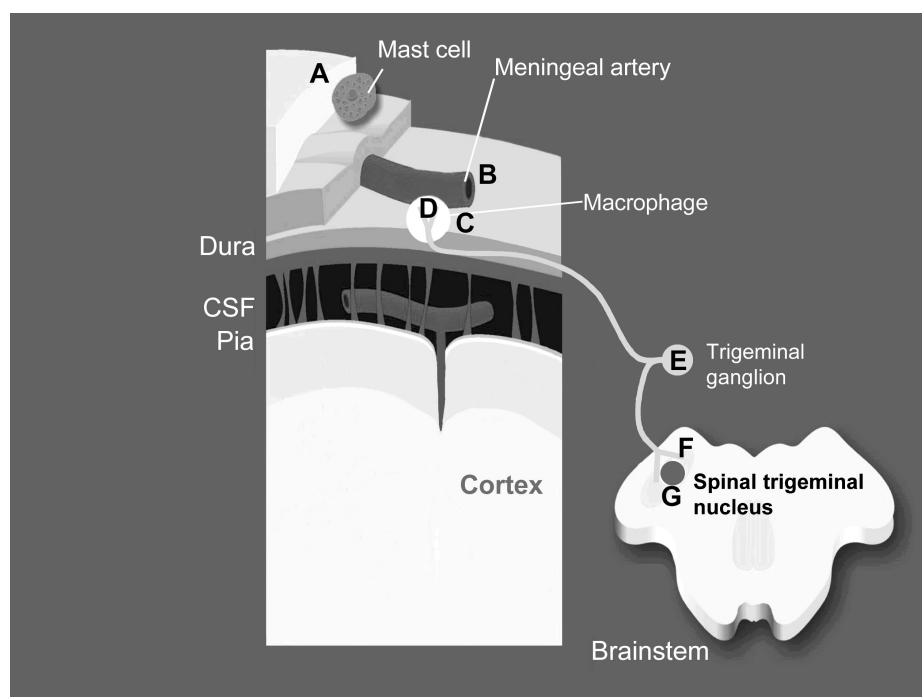


FIGURE 17-1. This figure diagrams trigeminal neurons, which have their cell bodies in the trigeminal ganglion (**E**), peripheral processes in meninges and orofacial tissue (**D**), and central processes (**F**) that synapse on cells in the spinal trigeminal nucleus of the brainstem (**G**). These neurons, like other sensory neurons, secrete neuropeptides at both their peripheral and central axon terminals. Secretion of neuropeptides in the periphery affects blood flow and inflammatory responses, and secretion of neuropeptides at the central terminal affects transmission of nociceptive signals. Hormones could affect this system at all three locations. In the periphery, hormones could alter responses of peripheral tissue to inflammation or injury by regulating responses of mast cells (**A**), meningeal arteries (**B**), or meningeal macrophages (**C**). At the neuronal cell bodies (**E**), hormones may regulate expression of neuropeptides and other genes that control excitability. Alteration of neuropeptide gene expression may change the mix of neuropeptides secreted at either the peripheral or central terminals, or both. At the central synapse (**F,G**), hormones may alter synaptic transmission by regulating neuropeptides present in central processes or by altering gene expression in the brainstem target cells. Hormone receptors are located in cells at all of these sites, and there is compelling evidence for hormonal influences at many of these sites.

Trigeminal Neurons

Trigeminal Peripheral Processes

CGRP Innervation of Meninges

The dura is innervated by trigeminal axons containing substance P and CGRP. Migraine attacks involve selective release of CGRP from trigeminal axons (43), which causes plasma extravasation and meningeal edema (23,24,81). CGRP also functions as a potent vasodilator (101,138), stimulates mast cell histamine release (101), is highly chemotactic to macrophages (33), and increases cytokine release from macrophages (133). Estrogen increases CGRP innervation of mammary gland tissue, associated primarily with blood vessels (17). It is not known whether hormones have similar effects on CGRP innervation of meningeal vessels.

Trigeminal Neuronal Cell Bodies, Neuropeptides, and Hormone Receptors

The trigeminal ganglion contains several populations of neurons (see review by Lazarov [69]) that express neuropeptides such as substance P and CGRP, but also other peptides potentially relevant to migraine including PACAP, atrial natriuretic peptide, neurokinin A, endothelin-1, enkephalin, dynorphin cholecystokinin, bombesin, somatostatin, vasoactive intestinal peptide, and galanin (see review by Lazarov [69]). Trigeminal neurons express $ER\alpha$, which is likely to regulate expression of many of these peptides.

Progesterone receptors are present in dorsal root ganglia (DRG) of female rats. Ovariectomy reduces expression of these receptors and increases behavioral

hypersensitivity to heat (93), suggesting a link between low progesterone levels and increased pain sensitivity. Progesterone may also regulate trigeminal function indirectly via effects on CGRP and the NGF-trkA system (41). Very little information is available about the potential role of progesterone or its receptors in trigeminal neurons.

Hormones May Alter Responses to Peripheral Inflammation or Nerve Injury (Phenotypic Plasticity)

Numerous studies have shown that phenotypic changes in sensory neurons accompany changes in response to painful stimuli from temporary to severe and chronic. Cutaneous allodynia occurs in certain well-defined regions of the skin during migraine, suggesting hyperexcitability of pain pathways (22), and migraineurs have significantly lower thresholds for the blink reflex and an increased sensitivity to tactile and painful stimuli, even during the interictal period (115). These increased responses indicate sensitization of trigeminal neurons.

Phenotypic plasticity of nociceptive sensory neurons is regulated by the NGF-trkA system (88). Small DRG neurons that are positive for CGRP transport NGF from the periphery (1,152). During inflammation, NGF levels increase (110) resulting in inflammatory hyperalgesia (84,150–151,152). Inflammation of orofacial tissue results in increased CGRP and substance P in the trigeminal ganglion (53). In addition, motifs that mimic a classical estrogen response element are found in the promoter and 5'-flanking regions of the genes for human trkA (125,135).

Sensory sensitization is associated with altered expression of neuropeptides (NP) such as NPY and galanin in trigeminal neurons in males (35,40). In females, NPY and galanin are regulated by ovarian steroids. NPY is a vasoconstrictive peptide usually associated with the parasympathetic nervous system. NPY-immunoreactive nerve fibers and receptors are expressed around cerebral vessels (12), and NPY inhibits dural plasma protein extravasation after trigeminal stimulation (155). Increased levels of NPY are present in cerebral spinal fluid after a migraine attack (139). Both Y1 and Y2 NPY receptors are located in trigeminal ganglia (131). NPY mRNA levels vary with the phase of the estrous cycle in female mice, with highest levels present at early estrus (104). Galanin increases markedly after nerve injury (49), when it regulates nociceptive signaling (50,62,63,75). In male mice, injury increases the galanin content of dorsal root ganglion cells 120-fold and the number of galanin positive neurons increases from 5% to more than 50% (2). Galanin injections into inflamed knee joints in rats cause a significant reduction in responses to noxious movements, suggesting that galanin is a critical component of the tonic inhibitory system for inflammatory pain (47). In the pituitary, estrogen

upregulates galanin mRNA expression up to 4000-fold and immunoreactivity up to 50-fold (59). In mice, galanin expression in trigeminal neurons is highest at proestrus, the stage of the estrous cycle when estrogen levels are highest (104). Galanin has several G-protein-coupled receptors including GalR1, GalR2, and GalR3 (20). GalR1, which has antinociceptive functions (52,61,74), is expressed in trigeminal ganglia and in peripheral targets of trigeminal neurons (130). GalR1 expression in the hypothalamus is modulated by ovarian steroids and is highest at proestrus (37). It is not known if ovarian steroids regulate GalR1 expression in the trigeminal system.

Intracellular Signaling Pathway

Inflammatory mediators produce hyperalgesia via activation of intracellular signaling pathways including members of the MAP kinase pathway ERKs (55). Activation of nociceptive fibers induces phosphoERK (pERK) in sensory neurons in an intensity-dependent manner, and ERK antagonists inhibit capsaicin-induced hyperalgesia (31). Ovarian steroids can modulate the activity of the ERK pathway (67).

Potential Effects of Ovarian Steroids on Trigeminal Central Processes and Postsynaptic Cells

Inflammation increases in the number of substance P and CGRP immunoreactive axons in the dorsal horn, whereas nerve injury increases galanin and NPY (51). The extent of neuroplasticity of trigeminal central terminals and potential effects of ovarian steroids on these responses have received little attention. Ovarian steroids may also regulate activity of postsynaptic cells directly, as neurons in lamina II of trigeminal nucleus caudalis (TNC) express ER α , and the number of these cells increases after ovariectomy (102). ER α is also present in nucleus caudalis (123). Changes in excitability of brainstem trigeminal neurons may underlie the increases in receptive field sizes in the spinal trigeminal nucleus observed when estrogen levels are high (9,10).

INTERACTIONS OF SEX HORMONES WITH BRAIN PAIN PROCESSING NETWORKS

Overall Network

The information regarding the peripheral action of sex hormones has been obtained from experimental animals. This is because there are no noninvasive techniques that can provide this type of information using human subjects. More data on the role of sex hormones in the

central processing of trigeminal pain processing in human are known because of the advances in imaging techniques. The currently available information from human studies correlates well with the animal studies of the role of sex hormones.

Information related to activation of sensory terminals innervating the dura and meninges are transmitted to neurons within the nucleus caudalis of the trigeminal complex. Functionally, this region, and its caudal extent into the cervical spinal cord, integrate nociceptive information arriving from the periphery and the descending systems and transmits this information to the medullary, pontine thalamic, and hypothalamic regions (11,26,118). Anatomic studies using injection of retrograde tracers into the TNC have identified four major sites as targets of TNC projections (26,32,46,78–80,94,99,107,108,119,148). These sites are the periaqueductal gray (PAG), the parabrachial nucleus (PBN), medial preoptic nucleus of the hypothalamus, and the ventrobasal nucleus of the thalamus. Further, injections of anterograde tracers into each of these sites indicate site-specific afferents from the TNC neurons that in turn receive afferents from the meninges and dura. The sites that receive afferents from TNC contain a dense population of sex hormone receptors and terminals. Therefore, changes in the level of these hormones can modulate signal processing within the TNC and propagation of these signals to the forebrain. The functions related to sex hormones in each of these sites are discussed next.

Parabrachial Nucleus

The PBN is a major integration site for cardiovascular control and pain modulation. The PBN is a part of the central autonomic circuitry that governs the autonomic response to changes in visceral functions (136). The PBN receives inputs from the nucleus of solitary tract and projects to the PAG, hypothalamus, and amygdala (13). There are reciprocal connections between PBN and its major outputs. The PBN receives nociceptive information from both the spinal and the trigeminal dorsal horns. Inputs from the trigeminal dorsal horn terminate predominantly in three regions of the PBN: the external lateral, the external medial, and the Kolliker-Fuse subnuclei, with sparser labeling present in the dorsal and superior lateral subnuclei and in the medial PBN. The anatomic organization of the PBN supports the hypothesis that this region is involved in autonomic symptoms associated with headache and migraine. Although this issue remains controversial, there is substantial evidence that the autonomic nervous system function is altered in migraine patients (103). Among the components of the changes in this system, a decrease in the basal level of norepinephrine (44,82), increased sensitivity to α -adrenergic agonists (44), increased sensitivity to cold pressor test (132), and increased sen-

sitivity of the pupil to pharmacologic stimulation (36) have been documented. Based on these findings, Peroutka (103) has proposed that the initial vasoconstriction produced by norepinephrine is replaced by vasodilatation produced by dopamine, prostaglandin, and adenosine that are coreleased with norepinephrine from the sympathetic terminals.

In addition to its role in the central autonomic control network, the PBN has profound inhibitory effects on the spinal and trigeminal dorsal horn neurons in both the marginal zone and substantia gelatinosa regions (27,58,86,146,149,154). The mechanisms that activate this descending system are not fully understood. However, the PBN is a part of the stress-induced analgesic system that includes the PAG, central nucleus of amygdala, and several hypothalamic regions (92).

Considering the properties of the PBN, changes in the activity of this region can have a profound effect on pain processing through the trigeminal system. Of significant interest is the fact that all subregions of the PBN that are involved in autonomic and pain modulation contain estrogen receptors and terminals (113,114,117). Functionally, the effect of estrogen injected into the PBN has been investigated. Studies by Saleh et al. have shown that injection of estrogen into the PBN significantly increases parasympathetic tone and decreases sympathetic tone, reflected as a significant decrease in blood pressure and heart rate. These effects of estrogen can be reversed by NMDA receptor antagonist and GABA receptor antagonist, indicating involvement of these receptors in the effects of estrogen on the autonomic system modulated by PBN (111,112). In addition, single unit recording from PBN neurons have shown that estrogen has an inhibitory effect by potentiation of GABAergic and reduction of glutamatergic tone (113).

Periaqueductal Gray

The PAG is a major site for integration of nociceptive, autonomic and reproductive behavior (6,91). Anatomically, the PAG has been divided in four subregions: dorsal, dorsolateral, lateral, and ventrolateral (4,8). Stimulation of different regions of the PAG produces a number of distinctly different behavioral and physiologic responses including vocalization, autonomic changes, sexual behavior, fear and rage reactions, and anxiety. Only stimulation of the ventrolateral and the dorsomedial parts of dorsal raphe produces relatively pure analgesia.

The PAG areas that receive afferents from the TNC and the areas that project to the TNC contain estrogen receptors and terminals (18,25,97,98,100,106,122,140,141). Estrogen has a significant effect on the synaptic morphology of the PAG neurons. Studies by Chung et al. (28) have shown that ovariectomized adult female rats treated with daily subcutaneous injections of estradiol benzoate for

20 days showed significant changes in the synaptic morphology including an increase in the number of synapses, the length of postsynaptic densities (PSDs), the number of PSDs showing perforations, synapses with positive synaptic curvature, dense-cored vesicles, and mean number of terminals that contained dense-cored vesicles. Functionally, the effects of gonadectomy and ovariectomy on the analgesic effect of morphine have been studied (65,66). These studies indicated that central morphine analgesia is significantly greater in male than in female rats. In addition, using a selective μ -opioid receptor agonist and a δ -opioid receptor agonist, Kepler et al. (60) have shown that sham-operated male rats displayed significantly greater magnitudes of peak and total analgesia than sham-operated female rats on the tail-flick test. In addition to a direct effect on opioids, the effects of sex hormones on two types of stress-induced analgesia have been examined. Using continuous cold water swim and intermittent cold water swim, studies by Bodnar have shown that female rats display significantly less analgesia than males, and gonadectomized rats display significantly less analgesia than sham-operated controls (19).

The anxiety circuitry of the PAG also depends on sex hormones. In behavioral studies, mice show maximal anxiety levels in diestrus. The minimal anxiety level is found at metestrus. As a related processes, the ability to acquire conditional response is the highest in female rats during proestrus (29,121). In general, progesterone has an anxiolytic effect (15).

Considering the literature cited, changes in both estrogen and progesterone can have significant effects on ascending pain transmission through the PAG as well as on PAG-mediated analgesia.

Medial Proptic Nucleus of Hypothalamus

Nociceptive information from the trigeminal sensory system is propagated to the hypothalamus by a direct projection from the TNC (21,77,94). The major site of termination of these afferents is the medial preoptic nucleus. This nucleus is involved in modulation of pain and analgesia (7,30), response to stress (120), temperature regulation (3,116), reproductive behavior (5), sleep–wakefulness (57), and autonomic control (145).

The medial preoptic nucleus plays an important role in integration and coordination of autonomic information relayed through the solitary nucleus and PBN and with the sensory information relayed through the dorsal horn and the reticular formation (91). Medial preoptic nucleus forms reciprocal connections with the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, PAG, nucleus tractus solitarii (NTS), and rostral ventral medulla and through these connections it is involved in cognitive and motivational aspects of

pain. The pain inhibitory influence of the medial preoptic nucleus is relayed through the PAG (45) and the rostral ventral medulla (56).

The medial preoptic nucleus contains estrogen- and progesterone-containing neurons and their receptors (122,124). Physiologic studies of the effects of estrogen on the preoptic area have indicated that estrogen has a significant effect on opioidergic and GABAergic transmission. Micevych et al. (89) have shown that estrogen treatment induced an internalization of μ -opioid receptors in the medial preoptic nucleus of ovariectomized wild-type mice that is mediated through estrogen receptor- α . This effect of estrogen may in part explain observations that in rodents and humans the analgesic effect of morphine is altered by stages of the estrous cycle (39). Estrogen potentiates the GABAergic transmission within the hypothalamic nuclei including the medial preoptic nucleus (48,105). As mentioned, the medial preoptic nucleus has a strong interaction with the limbic areas and brainstem pain modulatory networks. Considering these interactive networks, changes produced by sex hormones on the medial preoptic nucleus neurons suggest strong involvement of this region on hormone-related pain modulation.

Locus Coeruleus

Studies by Weiller et al. (142) using PET imaging have indicated an increase in regional cerebral blood flow in the brainstem at or near the locus coeruleus/subcoeruleus (LC/SC) region during spontaneous migraine attacks in migraine without aura. These studies also showed that the changes in blood flow persisted despite relief of symptoms following subcutaneous injection of sumatriptan. They concluded that in migraine without aura, brainstem activation during spontaneous migraine may be inherent to migraine and not simply its consequence. The mechanisms that relate to the involvement of LC/SC in headache are not totally clear. Anatomic studies have shown that LC/SC innervates all subnuclei of the trigeminal sensory nuclear complex (83,123,147). Electrophysiologic studies have shown that stimulation of LC/SC inhibits the response of the TNC to noxious stimulation (137). There is substantial evidence that neurons in the LC/SC respond to noxious stimulation (91); therefore, the pathway between LC and TNC may form a feedback system through which the pain produced by noxious stimulation of inflammation is reduced. In this regard, the basal activity of the LC/SC neurons can be of significant importance in pain modulation. Recent studies have shown that estrogen increases mRNA levels of tyrosine hydroxylase (TH) in the LC. Because the LC has an inhibitory role in pain transmission through the trigeminal system, an increase in the level of TH may lead to enhanced inhibitory tone on the trigeminal neurons when the estrogen level is high. This processes may be a contributing factor to “estrogen

withdrawal” migraine that develops when estrogen level falls.

SUMMARY

In summary, nociceptive information arising from the head, the dura, and meninges is processed within the TNC. There is substantial integration within the TNC, and sex hormones can modulate these activities at the local circuits in this nucleus. Following integration, the information is propagated to the higher centers through a highly interconnected parallel system to the midbrain, thalamus and hypothalamus. The areas that receive afferents from TNC are interconnected and communicate with major limbic systems of the brain. Sex hormones have modulatory roles in all of these regions. The symptoms associated with the effects of changes in sex hormone levels can be explained by the effects of these hormones at each of these sites.

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