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Conformationally-restricted amino acid analogues bearing a distal sulfonic acid show selective inhibition of system x_c^- over the vesicular glutamate transporter

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ABSTRACT

A panel of amino acid analogs and conformationally-restricted amino acids bearing a sulfonic acid were synthesized and tested for their ability to preferentially inhibit the obligate cysteine–glutamate transporter system x_c^- versus the vesicular glutamate transporter (VGLUT). Several promising candidate molecules were identified: *R/S*-4-[4'-carboxyphenyl]-phenylglycine, a biphenyl substituted analog of 4-carboxyphenylglycine and 2-thiopheneglycine-5-sulfonic acid both of which reduced glutamate uptake at system x_c^- by 70–75% while having modest to no effect on glutamate uptake at VGLUT.

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L-Glutamate (**1**) is a key neurotransmitter responsible for the vast majority of the fast excitatory synaptic communication in the mammalian CNS. L-Glutamate acts at ionotropic glutamate receptors to mediate ligand gated ion channels and at metabotropic glutamate receptors to couple intracellular second messenger systems via G-proteins.^{1–5} The importance of L-glutamate as a contributor to higher order processing required in development, plasticity, learning, and memory is well established.^{4,6,7} However, glutamatergic excitotoxicity can result when an excess of L-glutamate occurs and continually activates glutamate receptors.^{2,5,8} To maintain the proper titer of L-glutamate there is a network of strategically positioned transporters that shuttle L-glutamate in and out of cells and organelles. Most notable among these transporters are the excitatory amino acid transporters (EAATs) that facilitate the uptake of L-glutamate into neurons.⁸

In addition to EAATs, other transporters maintain intra- and extra-cellular levels of glutamate including; system x_c^- , a chloride-dependent, sodium-independent obligate exchanger that couples the export of intracellular L-glutamate with the import of extra-cellular L-cystine⁹⁻¹² and the vesicular glutamate transporter (VGLUT) that mediates the uptake of intracellular glutamate into synaptic vesicles.^{6,13,14}

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System x⁻ and VGLUT are structurally and functionally distinct from the EAATs and also from each other. Although system x_c and VGLUT differ pharmacologically,^{5,8,15,16} both transporters remove L-glutamate from the cytosol. In principle, therefore, intracellular L-glutamate levels could be regulated by modulating one or both of these transporters.¹⁶ As such, the development of inhibitors that selectively block system x_c and/or VGLUT represents an interesting pharmacologic challenge. Some inhibitors^{9,16,17} have been reported for system x_c^- and for VGLUT^{6,15,18-26} (Fig. 1). Two interesting features common to several system x_c^- and VGLUT inhibitors are the use of aromatic rings to conformationally lock²⁷ the acid groups (e.g., CPG) and sulfonic acid isosteres^{24,25,28} in place of a carboxylic acid. Seeing these as opportunities to explore similarities and differences in the specificities of system x_c^- and VGLUT, we prepared a number of conformationally-restricted glutamate analogs bearing a sulfonic acid group in place of the distal (γ) carboxylic acid of glutamate.

The target compounds were synthesized as shown in Schemes 1 and 2. Simple amino acid analogs (**3a–e**) of phenylglycine were synthesized via hydrolysis of the corresponding hydantoin intermediates (**2a–e**).^{29–32} The preparation of sulfonic acid analogs **5a–i** was carried out by reaction of commercially available amino acids with fuming sulfuric acid to afford monosulfonic acid analogs.³³ To explore the relative contribution of the amino acid center to inhibition two additional targets, compounds **7a–b**, were

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Figure 1. Structures of glutamate, VGLUT and system x_c^- inhibitors and their corresponding IC_{50} values.



Scheme 1. Synthesis of amino acid analogs **3a–f**. Reagents and conditions: (i) $(NH_4)_2CO_3$, KCN, 1:1 MeOH, H₂O, 50–60 °C, 3 h; (ii) Ba(CO₃)₂, H₂O, 100 °C, 72 h.



Scheme 2. Preparation of thiophene analogs 7a/7b.

synthesized by hydrolysis of the commercially available structures **6a–b** using 2 N NaOH. Each synthesized compound was characterized by ¹H NMR, IR, and mass spectral analysis³⁴ prior to testing at the two transporter systems (Table 1). Activity was assessed by quantifying the ability of the compounds to inhibit the specific uptake of ${}^{3}H-L$ -gluamate by either system x_{c}^{-} or VGLUT. System x_c^- mediated uptake of L-glutamate (100 μ M) was measured in SNB19 glioma cells under Na-free conditions, corrected for nonspecific uptake, and normalized to protein content.⁹ VGLUT mediated uptake of L-glutamate (250 µM) was measured in synaptic vesicles isolated from rat brain, corrected for non-specific uptake, and normalized to protein content ²⁰. The rationale for testing compounds **3a-f** was based on the fact that a thienylglycine heterocycle contains an embedded cysteine. The imidazole structure was prepared as a control analog. Structure 3e was built as a chain extended homologue of 4-CPG, which was found to be a good inhibitor of system x_c^- but a poor inhibitor of VGLUT. The activity of **3e** also suggests the likelihood that the compounds are interacting with lipophilic domains associated with the transporter, as has also been shown to occur with EAAT inhibitors.¹² Interestingly, all the thiophene-containing structures showed inhibition of system xand VGLUT with the 5-bromo thienvlglycine **3d** and benzothienvlglycine 3f blocking about 60% and 70% of VGLUT uptake, respectively (Table 1). The imidazo analog 3c was completely inactive indicating the importance of the thiophene ring and/or possibly contribution by the sulfur atom. Most surprising in this initial screen was the finding that the biphenyl analog of CPG 3e blocked 73% of glutamate uptake at system x_c^- but was a poor inhibitor of VGLUT.

Sulfonic acid analogs of the amino acids phenylglycine, phenylalanine and thienylglycine **5a–i** were prepared to determine the role of stereochemistry, isostere contribution and limitations of the γ -carboxylic acid group. We rationalized that CPG and cysteate are inhibitors of system x_c^- and therefore, CPG analogs bearing a γ -sulfonic acid would be more potent, and potentially highly selective inhibitors when compared as inhibitors of VGLUT. Neither D- or L-4-sulfophenylalanine **5ab** nor α -methyl 4-sulfophenylalanine **5d** blocked glutamate uptake at either transporter (Table 1). Sulfonation of 4-bromophenylalanine was conducted to afford the phenylalanine-2-sulfonic acid analog **5c** to reduce the distance between the two acid groups, and render it a conformationally-restricted analog of homocysteate.

However, compound **5c** was a poor inhibitor of both transporters. (*R*)-4-Sulfo-phenylglycine **5e** did not block glutamate uptake at either transporter, yet **5f** was a selective inhibitor of system x_c^- . We attribute this selectivity to the fact that system x_c^- generally requires an *S*-configured amino acid center for inhibitors whereas VGLUT shows no need for this center and, in fact, does not require a basic amine.

Using (*S*)-4-sulfophenylglycine as a new lead, we prepared the thiophene analogs that position the sulfonic acid and amino acid groups at a distance midway between 4-sulfophenylglycine and homocysteic acid. Both (*R*)-**5h** and (*S*)-4-sulfothienylglycine **5g** blocked uptake of glutamate at system x_c^- , 45% and 70%, respectively (Table 1). The latter compound proved as potent as the endogenous substrate L-cystine. Unlike system x_c^- both were less potent at VGLUT.

The last set of analogs we prepared to test specificity differences between system x_c^- and VGLUT were aminothiophenecarboxylic acids **7ab**. Since the thiophene scaffold showed promise in system x_c^- inhibitors, we next queried whether or not replacement of the - amino acid group with an aniline-type amine and carboxylic acid would preferentially block VGLUT. In both instances, glutamate uptake was blocked at system x_c^- and not VGLUT indicating that the presence of an α -amino acid group is not a requirement for system x_c^- inhibitor structure. This is also consistent with the activity of sulfazaline, an inhibitor of system x_c^- , which lacks the free α -amino acid head group that typifies the majority of known inhibitors. Sulfasalazine is of particular interest because it suggests that system x_c^- may represent a viable point of therapeutic intervention in the treatment of glial brain tumors.³⁵

Table 1

Percent of L-glutamate uptake in system x_c^- and VGLUT for compounds **3a–f**, **5a–i** and **7ab**. System x_c^- assay: 100 μ M L-glutamate and 500 μ M of inhibitor. VGLUT assay: 250 μ M L-glutamate and 5 mM of inhibitor

Entry	Structure or name	System x _c ⁻⁹ (% of uptake)	VGLUT ²² (% of uptake)
3a	R/S-5-(2-Thienyl)-2-thienylglycine	69 ± 1	53 ± 4
3b	R/S-4,5-Dimethyl-2-thienylglycine	73 ± 3	57 ± 10
3c	R/S-5-Imidazoylglycine	96 ± 6	95 ± 4
3d	R/S-5-Bromo-2-thienylglycine	83 ± 17	37 ± 6
3e	R/S-4-[4'-Carboxyphenyl]-phenylglycine	27 ± 2	75 ± 7
3f	R/S-Benzothiophene-3-glycine	53 ± 2	31 ± 4
5a	HO ₂ C SO ₃ H	90 ± 3	131 ± 31
5b	HO ₂ C	101 ± 6	102 ± 10
5c	HO_2C HO_3H Br	83±2	77 ± 9
5d	H ₃ C SO ₃ H HO ₂ C	106 ± 13	98 ± 13
5e	HO ₂ C H ₂ N SO ₃ H	98 ± 9	108 ± 9
5f	HO ₂ C H ₂ N SO ₃ H	55 ± 4	105 ± 10
5g	HO ₃ S S NH ₂	32 ± 1	92 ± 4
5h	HO ₃ S S CO ₂ H NH ₂	55 ± 3	104±9
5i	HO ₃ S S CO ₂ H NH ₂	26 ± 3	81 ± 7
7a	3-Amino, 4-methylthiophene-2-carboxylic acid	83 ± 2	91 ± 6
7b	3-Methyl, 5-aminothiophene-2,4-dicarboxylic acid	57 ± 4	44 ± 3
Cntrls	L-Cystine Congo red	22 ± 3 n/a	n/a 31 ± 2
	-		

Overall, the only sulfonic acid analog of phenylglycine or phenylalanine that showed activity was **5f** that selectively blocked 45% transport at system x_c^- . Substituted thienyl- and benzthienylglycines blocked VGLUT with marginal selectivity over system x_c^- , however, the presence of a sulfonic acid group on the thiophene (**5fgh**) afforded selective system x_c^- transport inhibitors. We are currently developing a system x_c^- pharmacophore model using the thiophene template to produce better inhibitors. One inhibitor that effectively reduced the uptake of glutamate at both transporters was *R*/*S*-benzothiophene-3-glycine. In summary, we have identified new system x_c inhibitors that we envision will become important pharmacologic tools, but additional work is needed to identify more effective dual inhibitors.

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- Spectral data for selected compounds. Compound 2c: yield 75%; mp 258-261 °C; ¹H NMR (400 MHz, DMSO- d_6): δ 12.02 (br s, 1H), 10.59 (br s, 1H), 8.06 (s, 1H), 7.59 (s, 1H), 7.09 (br s, 1H), 4.99 (s, 1H); 153 MS m/z = 167 (M+1); IR (KBr) (ν_{max}/cm^{-1}): 3414, 3241, 2700, 1729, 1456. Anal. Calcd for C₆H₆N₄O₂: C, 43.38; H, 3.64; N, 33.72. Found: C, 43.33; H, 3.59; N, 33.62. Compound 3c: yield 55%; mp >300 °C; ¹H NMR (400 MHz, D₂O): δ 7.51 (s, 1H), 6.88 (s, 1H), 4.91 (s, 1H); ESI MS m/z = 142 (M+1); IR (KBr) (v_{max}/cm^{-1}): 3250, 2348, 2287, 1593, 1462, 1377. Anal. Calcd for C5H7N3O2: C, 42.55; H, 5.00; N, 29.77. Found: C, 41.88; H, 5.20; N, 29.64. Compound 5h: yield 52%; mp >300 °C; ¹H NMR (400 MHz, D₂O): δ 7.32 (d, J = 7.35 Hz, 1H), 7.11 (d, J = 7.35 Hz, 1H), 5.07 (s, 1H); ¹³C: δ 173.5, 148.3, 141.2, 131.8, 131.5, 55.7; HRMS m/z = 237.9833 (M+1); IR (KBr) (v_{max} /cm⁻¹): 2634, 1746, 1613, 1527, 1214, 1165. Anal. Calcd for C₆H₇NO₅S₂: C, 30.37, H, 2.97, N, 5.90. Found: C, 30.51, H, 2.88, N, 5.94.
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