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## Novel Notch-sparing $\gamma$ -secretase inhibitors derived from a peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor agonist library

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### ABSTRACT

Screening of our library of peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor (PPAR) agonists yielded several phenylpropanoic acid-derived  $\gamma$ -secretase inhibitors (GSIs). Structure–activity relationship studies indicated that (*R*)-configuration of  $\alpha$ -substituted phenylpropanoic acid structure and cinnamic acid structure is favorable to prepare Notch-sparing GSIs.

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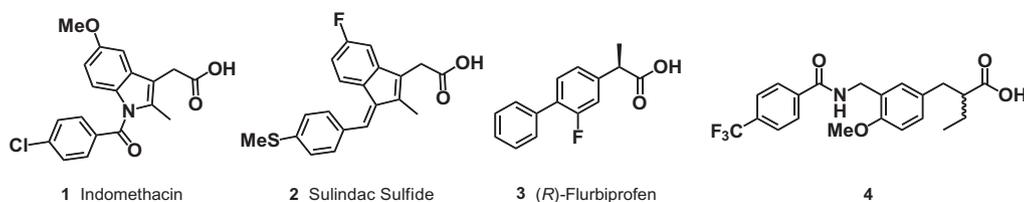
Alzheimer's disease (AD) is a chronic neurodegenerative disorder characterized by memory loss, personality changes and a decline in cognitive abilities, and is predicted to affect 20 million people worldwide within 20 years.<sup>1</sup> AD is pathologically characterized by the accumulation of senile plaques, neurofibrillary tangles, synaptic loss, and neuronal death. Several lines of evidence suggest that extracellular deposition of amyloid- $\beta$  peptide ( $A\beta$ ) as senile plaques is involved in the pathogenesis of AD.  $A\beta$  is proteolytically derived from amyloid precursor protein (APP) via sequential cleavages by  $\beta$ - and  $\gamma$ -secretases.  $\beta$ -Secretase-cleavage results in production of soluble APP $\beta$  and the membrane-bound C-terminal fragment C99.  $\gamma$ -Secretase, which is a membrane protein complex consisting of at least four proteins (i.e., presenilin 1 (PS1), nicastrin, anterior pharynx defective-1 and presenilin enhancer-2,<sup>2</sup>) cleaves C99 within its transmembrane domain to generate  $A\beta$  peptides composed of 38-, 40- and 42-amino acids (designated as  $A\beta_{38}$ ,  $A\beta_{40}$ ,  $A\beta_{42}$ ). Among these,  $A\beta_{42}$  is a highly amyloidogenic species and is predominantly deposited in AD brains.<sup>3–5</sup> Thus, increased levels of  $A\beta_{42}$  in the brain are considered to trigger a neuropathological cascade which ultimately leads to neurodegeneration and dementia.

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Development of  $\gamma$ -secretase inhibitors (GSIs) is a promising therapeutic approach for AD.<sup>1</sup> However, the  $\gamma$ -secretase cleaves not only APP, but also several other transmembrane proteins, including Notch, the latter being indispensable for the differentiation and development of a variety of organs and tissues. Thus, most of the reported GSIs cause severe adverse effects, because these compounds are not substrate-specific and inhibit Notch signalling.<sup>6–8</sup> Recently, compounds capable of modulating the  $\gamma$ -secretase activity to alter and/or block  $A\beta$  production with little or no effect on Notch cleavage have been identified.<sup>9–12</sup> Such compounds, called Notch-sparing GSIs (NS-GSIs) or  $\gamma$ -secretase modulators (GSMs), would be good candidates for AD therapeutics.

Herein, we report structurally new GSIs with substrate selectivity. We have been engaged in structural development studies of PPAR ligands for the treatment of metabolic syndrome, cancer and so on, based on phenylpropanoic acid structure as a basic framework (Fig. 1).<sup>13</sup> PPAR ligands are constructed from three components, that is, the acidic head group, the hydrophobic tail group, and the linking group connected the acidic head group and the hydrophobic tail group. Previous studies have indicated that a subset of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as indomethacin, sulindac sulfide and (*R*)-flurbiprofen, specifically reduce the  $A\beta_{42}$  production, acting as NS-GSIs independently of their inhibitory activity for cyclooxygenases.<sup>9</sup> Considering the



**Figure 1.** Structures of the representative  $\gamma$ -secretase modulators **1–3**, and our representative PPAR ligand **4**.

similar structural profile of NSAID-type NS-GSIs, which contain a highly lipophilic component in combination with an acidic functional group, we searched for compounds that inhibit or modulate  $\gamma$ -secretase activity by screening our PPAR agonist library. Cell-based  $\gamma$ -secretase assay was performed using an HEK293 cell line (NLNFK) stably co-overexpressing enhanced green fluorescent protein (EGFP), Swedish mutant APP, truncated Notch (Notch $\Delta$ E) and Notch-responsive CSL-luciferase reporter.<sup>14</sup> Using this cell line, we are able to analyze simultaneously the effect of compounds on A $\beta$  secretion and Notch signaling. The activities were expressed as relative percentage inhibitory activity compared to that of 10  $\mu$ M DAPT (*N*-[*N*-(3,5-difluorophenylacetyl)-*L*-alanyl]-*S*-phenylglycine *t*-butyl ester), an authentic potent GSI.<sup>15</sup> In each set of experiments, the assay was performed in duplicate or triplicate.

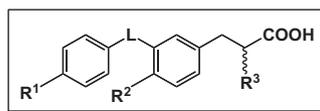
Our initial screening results are summarized in Table 1. The CONHCH<sub>2</sub> linker compound **4**,<sup>16</sup> which exhibits potent dual PPAR $\alpha/\delta$  agonistic activity with EC<sub>50</sub> values in the low nanomolar range, did not exhibit any apparent effect on APP, while it exhibited NOTCH cleavage-inhibitory activity at the concentration of 1  $\mu$ M. At 100  $\mu$ M, A $\beta$  secretion was increased by twofold. Notably, a concomitant increase of Notch signaling was observed, suggesting that this compound differentially modulated the  $\gamma$ -secretase activity in a substrate-specific manner. This differential modulation was affected by the shape of the substituent at the  $\alpha$ -position of the carboxyl group (**5**, **6**) and the steric bulkiness of the 4-position substituent on the distal benzene ring of the molecule (**7**, **8**). In contrast, compound **9**,<sup>17</sup> a weaker PPAR agonist than **4** with a reversed CH<sub>2</sub>NHCO linker, exhibited inhibition of A $\beta$  secretion as well as Notch signaling at both assay concentrations. The potency of **9** seems comparable to that of sulindac sulfide (IC<sub>50</sub> values of

sulindac sulfide for A $\beta$ <sub>40</sub>, A $\beta$ <sub>42</sub> and Notch are 215  $\mu$ M, 82.5  $\mu$ M and 53.0  $\mu$ M respectively). These results indicated the importance of the shape and/or nature of the linking group for inhibition of the A $\beta$ -generating  $\gamma$ -secretase activity.

The central methoxy group could be replaced with a fluorine atom. Compound **10** exhibited similar activity to **9**, but with a reduced Notch-inhibitory activity. The steric hindrance of the distal benzene substituent R<sup>1</sup> might be important for substrate specificity. Increasing steric bulkiness decreased the inhibitory activity for A $\beta$  secretion (**10** > **11** > **12**), but increased that for Notch cleavage (**12** > **11** > **10**).

Based on the initial screen, we concluded that phenylpropanoic acid structure with a CH<sub>2</sub>NHCO linker was effective, as in **9**. However, this compound had been assayed as a racemate. In order to ascertain the stereochemistry–activity relationship, we then assayed both enantiomers of **9**. Its cinnamic acid derivatives **18a–c** were also assayed, because in the case of PPAR, both frameworks are effective as PPAR agonists. Compounds **18a–c** were prepared from 5-formylsalicylic acid (**13**) in five steps. Compound **13** was benzylated with 4-methoxybenzyl bromide, followed by methylation of the phenolic hydroxyl group to afford the benzaldehyde derivative (**15**). Compound **15** was treated with trialkyl 2-phosphonoalkylate in the presence of *t*BuOK as a base, followed by hydrolysis with trifluoroacetic acid and amidation with 4-trifluoromethylbenzylamine to afford alkyl cinnamate derivatives (**17a–c**). Alkaline hydrolysis of **17a–c** and recrystallization afforded the desired **18a–c**. The *E*-stereochemistry was assigned based on the coupling constant (in the case of **18a**, Scheme 1) or the presence of the NOESY correlation peak between Ha and Hb (in the cases of **18b** and **18c**, Scheme 1). The correlation peak between Ha and

**Table 1**  
Cleavage activities of compounds **4–12**

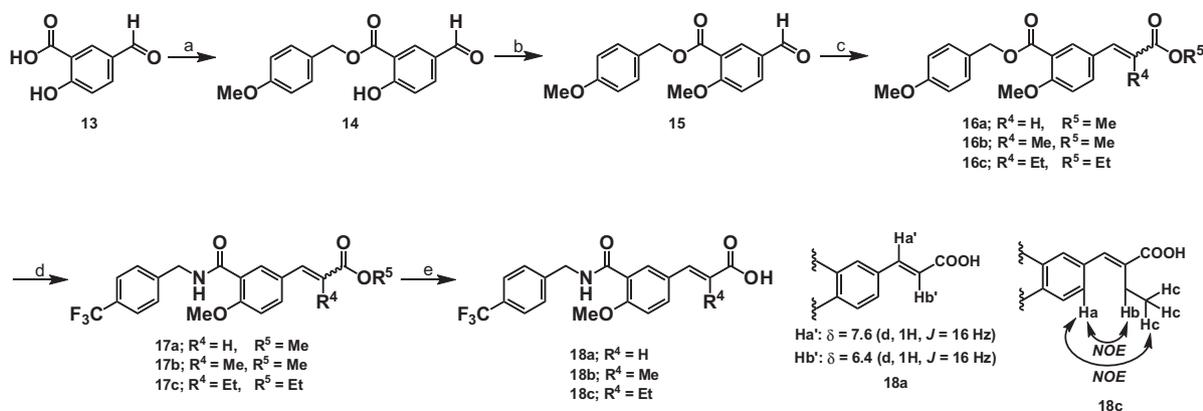


No.	L	R <sup>1</sup>	R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>3</sup>	A $\beta$ <sub>40</sub>		A $\beta$ <sub>42</sub>		Notch	
					1 $\mu$ M	100 $\mu$ M	1 $\mu$ M	100 $\mu$ M	1 $\mu$ M	100 $\mu$ M
4	CONHCH <sub>2</sub>	CF <sub>3</sub>	OCH <sub>3</sub>	CH <sub>2</sub> CH <sub>3</sub>	89.5	186	101	220	31.2	0.00
5	CONHCH <sub>2</sub>	CF <sub>3</sub>	OCH <sub>3</sub>	CH <sub>3</sub>	114	132	109	139	190	190
6	CONHCH <sub>2</sub>	CF <sub>3</sub>	OCH <sub>3</sub>	H	104	112	102	104	178	162
7	CONHCH <sub>2</sub>	OCH <sub>2</sub> CF <sub>3</sub>	OCH <sub>3</sub>	CH <sub>2</sub> CH <sub>3</sub>	118	136	119	133	170	84.0
8	CONHCH <sub>2</sub>	OPh	OCH <sub>3</sub>	CH <sub>2</sub> CH <sub>3</sub>	103	119	103	145	200	162
9	CH <sub>2</sub> NHCO	CF <sub>3</sub>	OCH <sub>3</sub>	CH <sub>2</sub> CH <sub>3</sub>	82.0	41.0	88.5	15.2	102	8.90
10	CH <sub>2</sub> NHCO	CF <sub>3</sub>	F	CH <sub>2</sub> CH <sub>3</sub>	77.6	13.0	63.3	0.00	53.8	38.5
11	CH <sub>2</sub> NHCO	OCF <sub>3</sub>	F	CH <sub>2</sub> CH <sub>3</sub>	90.6	42.6	87.4	55.7	67.2	0.00
12	CH <sub>2</sub> NHCO	OPh	F	CH <sub>2</sub> CH <sub>3</sub>	89.8	63.2	99.7	106	6.30	6.80
DMSO					100		100		100	
DAPT					0.00 <sup>a</sup>		0.00 <sup>a</sup>		0.00 <sup>a</sup>	
Sulindac sulfide					98.4 <sup>b</sup>	88.6 <sup>c</sup>	97.1 <sup>b</sup>	60.3 <sup>c</sup>	90.7 <sup>b</sup>	43.9 <sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The relative  $\gamma$ -secretase activity elicited with 10  $\mu$ M DAPT was designated as 0%.

<sup>b</sup> 3  $\mu$ M sulindac sulfide was used.

<sup>c</sup> 30  $\mu$ M sulindac sulfide was used.



**Scheme 1.** Synthesis of the  $\gamma$ -secretase modulator **18s**. Reagents and conditions: (a) 4-methoxybenzylamine, KHCO<sub>3</sub>, DMF, rt, 24 h, quant.; (b) MeI, K<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>, DMF, 24 h, 93%; (c) (1) *t*BuOK, trialkylphosphonoalkylate, dehydrated THF, rt, 6 h, 61–82%, (2) trifluoroacetic acid, rt, 24 h, 77–84%; (d) 4-(trifluoromethyl)benzylamine, DEPC, TEA, DMF, rt, 24 h, 77–89%; (e) (1) 2 mol/L NaOH, EtOH, 60 °C, 24 h, (2) recrystallization from *n*-hexane/AcOEt, 28–54% (two steps).

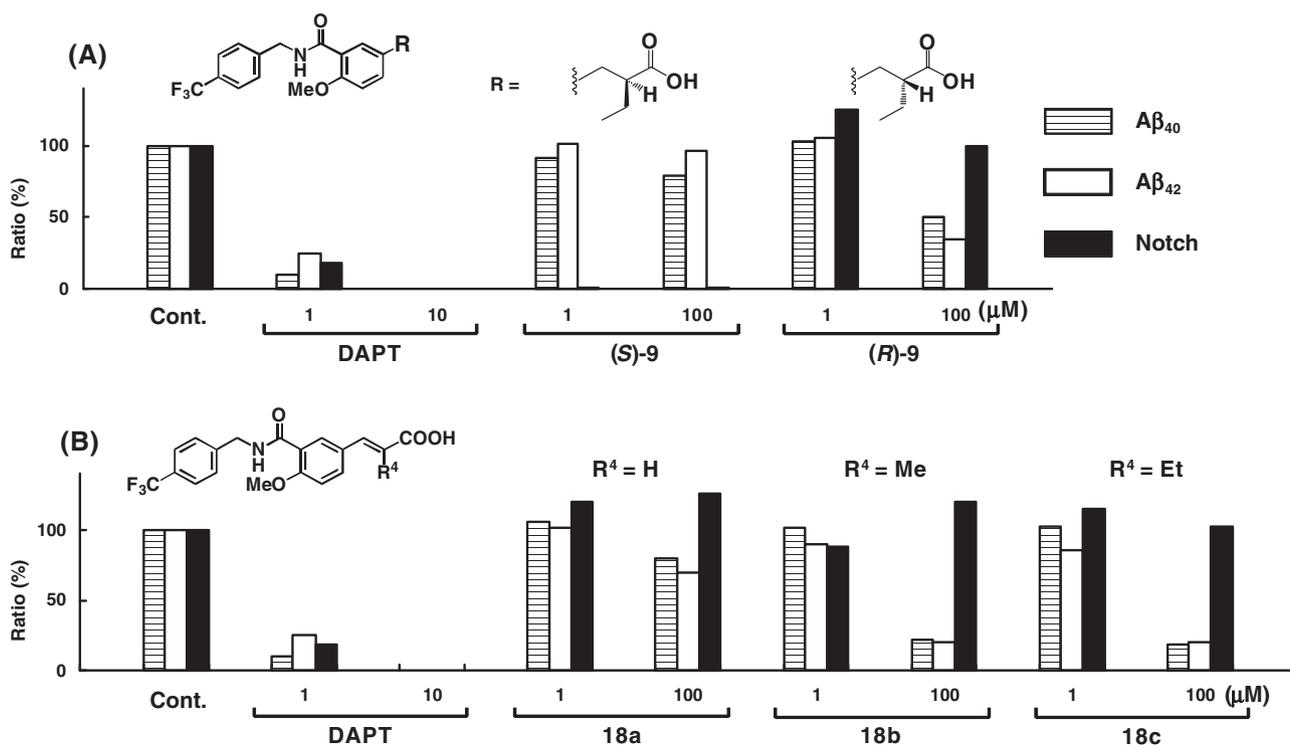
Hc was also observed in the case of **18c** (Scheme 1). The preparation of the optically active  $\alpha$ -ethylphenylpropanoic acid derivatives, (*S*)-**9** and (*R*)-**9**, was reported previously.<sup>17</sup>

The inhibitory activities of these compounds are summarized in Figure 2. Compound (*S*)-**9** did not inhibit A $\beta$ -generating  $\gamma$ -secretase activity at the high concentration of 100  $\mu$ M, for either A $\beta$ <sub>40</sub> or A $\beta$ <sub>42</sub>. On the other hand, the antipodal (*R*)-**9** inhibited  $\gamma$ -secretase activity leading to both A $\beta$ <sub>40</sub> and A $\beta$ <sub>42</sub> at 100  $\mu$ M. These results clearly indicated that inhibitory activity of **9** towards A $\beta$  generation resides mainly in the (*R*)-enantiomer. Notably, the PPAR-agonistic activity of **9** resides mainly in the (*S*)-enantiomer<sup>17</sup> suggesting that the inhibition of A $\beta$ -generating activity occurs independently of the modulation of the transcriptional activity of PPAR. In accordance with this notion, (*R*)-**9** inhibited the  $\gamma$ -secretase activity in in vitro assay using recombinant substrate (IC<sub>50</sub> val-

ues for de novo generation of A $\beta$ <sub>40</sub> and A $\beta$ <sub>42</sub> are 15.2  $\mu$ M and 10.1  $\mu$ M, respectively),<sup>18</sup> indicating that these compounds act directly on the  $\gamma$ -secretase.

It is very important to note the contrasting results that effective Notch-inhibitory activity was seen at the low concentration of 1  $\mu$ M (*S*)-**9**, whereas (*R*)-**9** did not exhibit apparent Notch-inhibitory activity at the higher concentration of 100  $\mu$ M. This suggests that inhibitory activities for A $\beta$  generation and Notch signaling might be separated by controlling the stereochemistry of the substituent at the  $\alpha$ -position of phenylpropanoic acid derivatives. The IC<sub>50</sub>s of (*S*)-**9** for A $\beta$ <sub>40</sub>, A $\beta$ <sub>42</sub> and Notch are >100  $\mu$ M, >100  $\mu$ M and 24.0  $\mu$ M, respectively, while those of (*R*)-**9** are 37.8  $\mu$ M, 34.2  $\mu$ M and >100  $\mu$ M, respectively.

The cinnamic acid derivatives (**18a–c**) exhibited similar pharmacological character to (*R*)-**9**. That is, **18a–c** exhibited dose-



**Figure 2.** Cleavage activities of DAPT, (*S*)-**9**, (*R*)-**9**, and **18a,b,c**. Relative  $\gamma$ -secretase activities are shown as the ratio (%) to the control (left), taken as 100%, and 10  $\mu$ M DAPT as 0%.

dependent inhibitory activity for both  $A\beta_{40}$  and  $A\beta_{42}$ -generating activities without affecting Notch signaling. An  $\alpha$ -alkyl substituent was required for potent  $\gamma$ -secretase-inhibitory activity, because **18b** and **18c** exhibited more potent  $\gamma$ -secretase inhibitory activity than **18a**. The  $IC_{50}$ s for  $A\beta_{40}$ ,  $A\beta_{42}$  and Notch are calculated to 32.7  $\mu$ M, 22.4  $\mu$ M and >100  $\mu$ M, respectively. Based on the calculated  $IC_{50}$ s, **18c** exhibited more potent GSI activity than sulindac sulfide, with a reduced effect on the Notch signaling pathway. Nevertheless, further mechanistic study on the mode of action of these compounds is still needed.

In conclusion, we found that the phenylpropanoic acid with a  $CH_2NHCO$  linker and cinnamic acid with a  $CH_2NHCO$  linker can be employed as scaffolds for the creation of structurally novel NS-GSIs. Moreover, we identified phenylpropanoic acid with a  $CONHCH_2$  linker as a Notch-specific GSI. Notch inhibition is considered to be effective against cancer cell induction and/or proliferation in a subset of malignant neoplasms.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, such compounds could be useful as a scaffold for developing agents to treat Notch-dependent cancer. Further chemical modification studies are on-going.

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