

GABA_B Receptor Subunit GB1 at the Cell Surface Independently Activates ERK1/2 through IGF-1R Transactivation

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Abstract

Background: Functional GABA_B receptor is believed to require hetero-dimerization between GABA_{B1} (GB1) and GABA_{B2} (GB2) subunits. The GB1 extracellular domain is required for ligand binding, and the GB2 trans-membrane domain is responsible for coupling to G proteins. Atypical GABA_B receptor responses observed in GB2-deficient mice suggested that GB1 may have activity in the absence of GB2. However the underlying mechanisms remain poorly characterized.

Methodology/Principal Findings: Here, by using cells overexpressing a GB1 mutant (GB1_{asa}) with the ability to translocate to the cell surface in the absence of GB2, we show that GABA_B receptor agonists, such as GABA and Baclofen, can induce ERK1/2 phosphorylation in the absence of GB2. Furthermore, we demonstrate that GB1_{asa} induces ERK1/2 phosphorylation through Gi/o proteins and PLC dependent IGF-1R transactivation.

Conclusions/Significance: Our data suggest that GB1 may form a functional receptor at the cell surface in the absence of GB2.

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Introduction

γ-aminobutyric acid (GABA) is a major inhibitory neurotransmitter in the mammalian central nervous system (CNS) [1] which mediates fast synaptic inhibition through ionotropic GABA_A and GABA_C receptors, as well as slow and prolonged synaptic inhibition through metabotropic GABA_B receptor [2]. The GABA_B receptor belongs to the class C G protein coupled receptors (GPCRs) and is composed of two distinct subunits, GABA_{B1} (GB1) and GABA_{B2} (GB2) [3–7]. The GB1 subunit binds to GABA, while the GB2 is responsible for the activation of Gi/o proteins [8,9]. Evidence suggests that GB1 and GB2 heterodimerization is required for functional receptor formation. Cell surface trafficking of the GABA_B receptor is controlled by an endoplasmic reticulum (ER) retention signal (RSRR motif) in the intracellular C-terminus of the GB1 subunit. GB1 alone can't translocate to the cell surface unless associated with GB2, through which the coil-coiled interaction between the C-terminus masks the ER retention signals [10,11]. A mutation of the ER retention signal from RSRR to ASAR (GB1_{asa}) allows GB1 to reach the cell surface independently [12].

During embryonic development, GB1 mRNA is detected in the hippocampal formation, cerebral cortex, intermediate and posterior neuroepithelium and the pontine neuroepithelium at E12. However, GB2 mRNA and protein are not detected at the same period in the central neuronal system (CNS) [13]. In adult organisms, whereas GB2 expression is limited to the brain [3], expression of GB1 is observed in most CNS regions and in peripheral tissues [1,14–17]. GB1 and GB2 mRNAs are equally abundant in the cortex, thalamus, medial and lateral geniculate bodies, habenula, and cerebellum. Whereas the levels of GB2 mRNA are low to undetectable in caudate/putamen, hypothalamus, septum, preoptic area, and substantia nigra, GB1 mRNA is present at moderate to high levels. Likewise, whereas GB2 mRNA is undetectable in glial cells of white matter throughout the rat brain and spinal cord, expression of GB1 mRNA is detected in glial cells of all white matter and in glia throughout many areas of the brain [18]. These reports suggest that GB1 may be able to homodimerize, or heterodimerize with an unrecognized partner, and thus may exert GABA_B receptor-mediated physiological functions in the absence of GB2. Indeed, GB2-deficient (GB2^{-/-}) mice show atypical electrophysiological GABA_B receptor responses in hippocampal slices [19]. However, in

GB2-deficient mice whether GB1 exerts its function in the ER or at the cell surface, and how this effect is mediated, is not known.

In the present study, GB1asa-transfected HEK293 cells are used to address whether GB1asa at the cell surface is sufficient to induce ERK1/2 phosphorylation as a functional GABA_B receptor would do [20,21]. We find that selective activation of GB1asa leads to ERK1/2 phosphorylation through Gi/o proteins and phospholipase C (PLC). Even more interestingly, we demonstrate that GB1asa-induced ERK1/2 phosphorylation occurs through transactivation of the IGF-1 receptor (IGF-1R).

Materials and Methods

Materials

GABA and IGF-1 were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO, USA). Baclofen and CGP54626 were purchased from Tocris (Fisher-Bioblock, Illkirch, France). Pertussis toxin (PTX), U73122 and U73343 were purchased from Merck Biosciences (Darmstadt, Germany). Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium (DMEM), penicillin, fetal bovine serum (FBS) and other solutions used for cell cultures were purchased from Invitrogen (Shanghai, China). PRK6 plasmids encoding wild-type GB1 and GB2 and mutant GB1asa with an epitope tag at their N-terminal ends under the control of a cytomegalovirus promoter were described previously [12]. Primary antibodies including phospho-p44/42 MAP kinase (T202/Y204) (# 9101) antibody, p44/42 MAPK (# 9102) antibody, phospho-Tyr1135/1136 IGF-1R antibody (19H7), IGF-1R antibody (111A9), were purchased from Cell Signaling Technology (Beverly, MA, USA). Anti-GB1 antibody (Ab55051) was purchased from Abcam (Cambridge, UK). Anti-GB2 (C-terminal) antibody was from Invitrogen (Shanghai, China). Anti-Flag-M2 monoclonal antibody was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich (St. Louis, MO, USA).

Cell Culture and Transfection

Human embryonic kidney HEK293 cells were kindly provided by Dr. Philippe Rondard (Institut de Génomique Fonctionnelle, Montpellier, France) [21]. Mouse embryonic fibroblast (MEF) cells were kindly provided by Dr. Steve P. Balk (Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA) [22]. HEK293 cells were cultured in Dulbecco's modified Eagle's medium supplemented with 10% FBS and transfected by electroporation as described previously [23] or by lipofectamine 2000. For electroporation transfection, cells (10^7) were transfected with plasmid DNA containing cDNAs encoding GB1asa (4 µg) or GB1 (4 µg) or GB2 (4 µg), with the addition of pRK6 vector to a total amount of 10 µg of plasmid DNA. For lipofectamine 2000 transfection, cells in 6-well plates were transfected with plasmid DNA containing cDNAs encoding GB1asa (500 ng) or GB1 (300 ng) or GB2 (500 ng), with the addition of pRK6 vector to a total amount of 800 ng of plasmid DNA.

Quantification of Cell Surface Expression and Total Expression of GB1 by ELISA

After transfection with HA-tagged versions of the constructs by Lipofectamine 2000 according to the manufacturer's protocol, HEK-293 cells were grown in DMEM at 37°C in a humidified atmosphere containing 95% air and 5% CO₂ overnight and then split into white-walled, clear bottom 96-well plates coated with poly-L-lysine. 24 hrs later cells were washed twice with PBS, fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde in PBS (non-permeabilized for detection of the cell surface expression), or fixed with 4% paraformaldehyde and 0.1% Triton-100 in PBS (permeabilized for detection of the total expression), then blocked with PBS and

1% fetal calf serum. After 30 min incubation, the anti-HA monoclonal antibody conjugated with horseradish peroxidase (clone 3F10, Roche Bioscience, Basel, Switzerland) was applied for 30 min and cells were washed. Bound antibody was detected by chemoluminescence using SuperSignal substrate (Pierce, Rockford, IL, USA) and a 2103 EnVision™ Multilabel Plate Readers (Perkin Elmer, Waltham, MA, USA).

RNA Extraction and RT-PCR

24 hours after transfection, total RNA was extracted using Trizol and isolated according to the procedure supplied by the manufacturer (Invitrogen). Reverse transcription was carried out according to the manufacturer's protocol (Invitrogen). The first strand of the cDNA was generated from 4 µg of total RNA using oligo-dT primer and M-MLV reverse transcriptase (Invitrogen). Nucleotide primers were prepared based on the sequences of human GB2 and β-actin. The sequences of these oligonucleotide primers were as follows: Primer for human GB2 (851 bp), 5'-ACCATCAGGTTCCAAGGATC-3' (forward) and 5'-AGGCA-GAGGGTGTGGTGCT-3' (reverse). Primer for human β-actin (290 bp): 5'-CGGAACCGCTCATTGCC-3' (forward); antisense, 5'-ACCCACACTGTGCCCATCTA-3' (reverse). The PCR was performed initially by denaturation at 94°C for 5 min, followed by 30 cycles of denaturation at 94°C for 1 min, annealing at 57°C for 1 min, extension at 72°C for 45 s (for GABA_BR2, duration of 90 s), and a final extension step at 72°C for 10 min. Amplified DNA fragments were electrophoretically fractionated on 1% agarose gels.

RNAi Transfection in Mouse Embryonic Fibroblast (MEF) Cells

IGF-R RNAi knockdown experiment using MEF cells were performed as previously described [24]. MEF cells were first transfected with shRNA and then with GB1asa (1 µg) by lipofectamine 2000. After 24 hrs, cells were treated with inhibitory compounds.

Drug Treatments

Cultures were washed once with Ca²⁺-free HEPES-buffered solution (HBS) (containing 10 mM HEPES, pH 7.4, 140 mM NaCl, 4 mM KCl, 2 mM MgSO₄ and 1 mM KH₂PO₄) and pre-incubated at 37°C with or without indicated inhibitors dissolved in HBS for 60 min. For PTX treatment, the cultures were pretreated for 14–16 hrs with PTX (200 ng/ml) or left untreated. Cells were then stimulated for the indicated time by incubating with GABA or IGF-1 prepared in fresh HBS. Inhibitors were dissolved in HBS with or without dimethyl sulfoxide (DMSO) or/and alcohol. Whenever DMSO or/and alcohol were used, HBS containing the same concentration of DMSO, alcohol, or both were used as the control vehicle. At the end of the treatment, the cells were quickly washed with ice-cold Ca²⁺-free PBS at pH 7.4, and 200 µl ice-cold lysis buffer (50 mM Tris pH 7.4, 150 mM NaCl, 1% SDS, 1 mM EDTA, 2.5 mM Sodium pyrophosphate, 1 mM β-glycerophosphate, 1 mM Na₃VO₄, 1 µg/ml leupeptin, 1 mM PMSF) was added to the cells and placed immediately on ice.

Western Blot Analysis

Cell lysates were sonicated and protein concentrations were determined using Bradford reagent (Bio-Rad Laboratories Ltd., Hertfordshire, UK). Lysates were mixed with 4X SDS sample loading buffer (0.25 M Tris pH 6.8, 8% SDS, 40% glycerol, 0.4 M DTT, 0.04% bromophenol blue). Samples were boiled for

5 min then equal amounts of protein (20 μ g) were resolved by SDS-PAGE on 8–12% gels. Proteins were transferred to nitrocellulose membranes (Millipore, Bedford, MA) and blocked in blocking buffer (5% nonfat dry milk in TBS and 0.1% Tween 20) for 1 hr at room temperature. The blots were then incubated with primer antibodies at the relevant dilution overnight at 4°C, and with horseradish peroxidase-linked secondary antibodies for 2 hrs. Immunoblots were detected using enhanced chemiluminescence reagents (Pierce Protein Research Products, Rockford, IL, USA) and visualized on X-ray film. The density of immunoreactive bands was measured by NIH imaging software, and all bands were normalized to percentages of control values.

Statistical Analysis

Data are presented as means \pm SEM of at least three independent experiments. Statistical analysis was performed by

Student's *t*-test. Values with $p < 0.05$ were considered statistically significant.

Results

GB1asa can Induce ERK1/2 Phosphorylation Independent of GB2

Functional heterodimeric GABA_B receptor induces ERK1/2 phosphorylation in neurons [20,21]. To test whether GB1 can activate ERK1/2 phosphorylation in the absence of GB2, HEK293 cells were transfected with a GB1 mutant, GB1asa. This mutant is able to translocate to the cell surface independent of GB2. Specific GABA_B receptor agonists, such as GABA (100 μ M) or Baclofen (100 μ M), induced ERK1/2 phosphorylation in a transient manner in cells overexpressing only GB1asa (Fig. 1A). We further evaluated the effect of the GABA_B receptor-

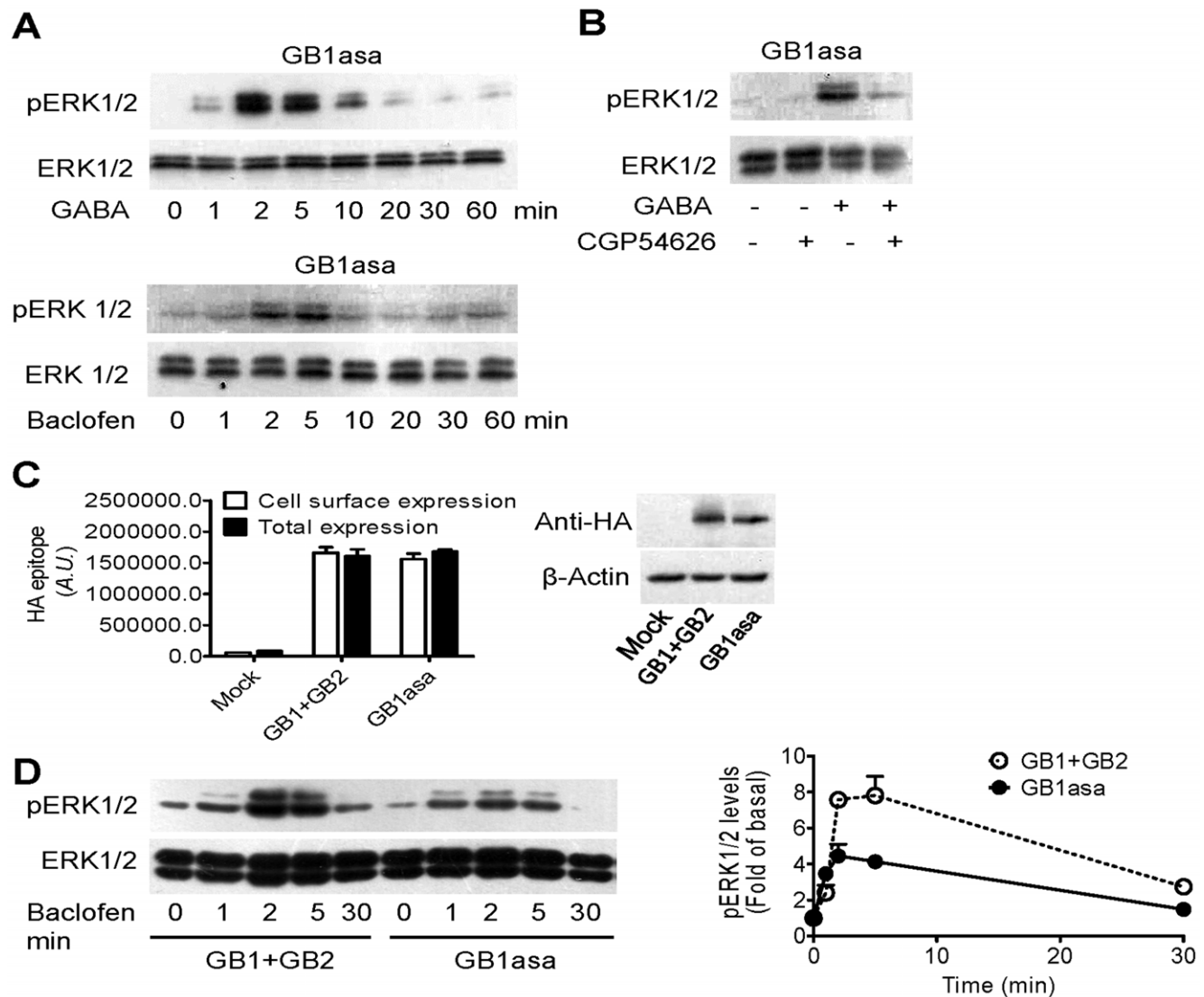


Figure 1. GB1asa can induce ERK1/2 phosphorylation independent of GB2. (A) Effects of GABA (100 μ M) and Baclofen (100 μ M) on ERK1/2 phosphorylation in cells overexpressing GB1asa over the indicated time course. (B) Effects of CPG54626 (10 μ M; 20 min) is incubated before treatment with GABA (100 μ M; 3 min). (C) Detection of expression of ^{HA}GB1asa alone or ^{HA}GB1 in the presence of ^{Flag}GB2 by ELISA (upper panel) and Western blots (lower panel). (D) Time course of the ERK1/2 phosphorylation induced by GABA (100 μ M) in the HEK293 cells transfected with both GB1 and GB2 or GB1asa alone. The representative western blots are shown under the quantified data of ERK1/2 phosphorylation analyzed from at least three separate experiments (mean \pm SEM). doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0039698.g001

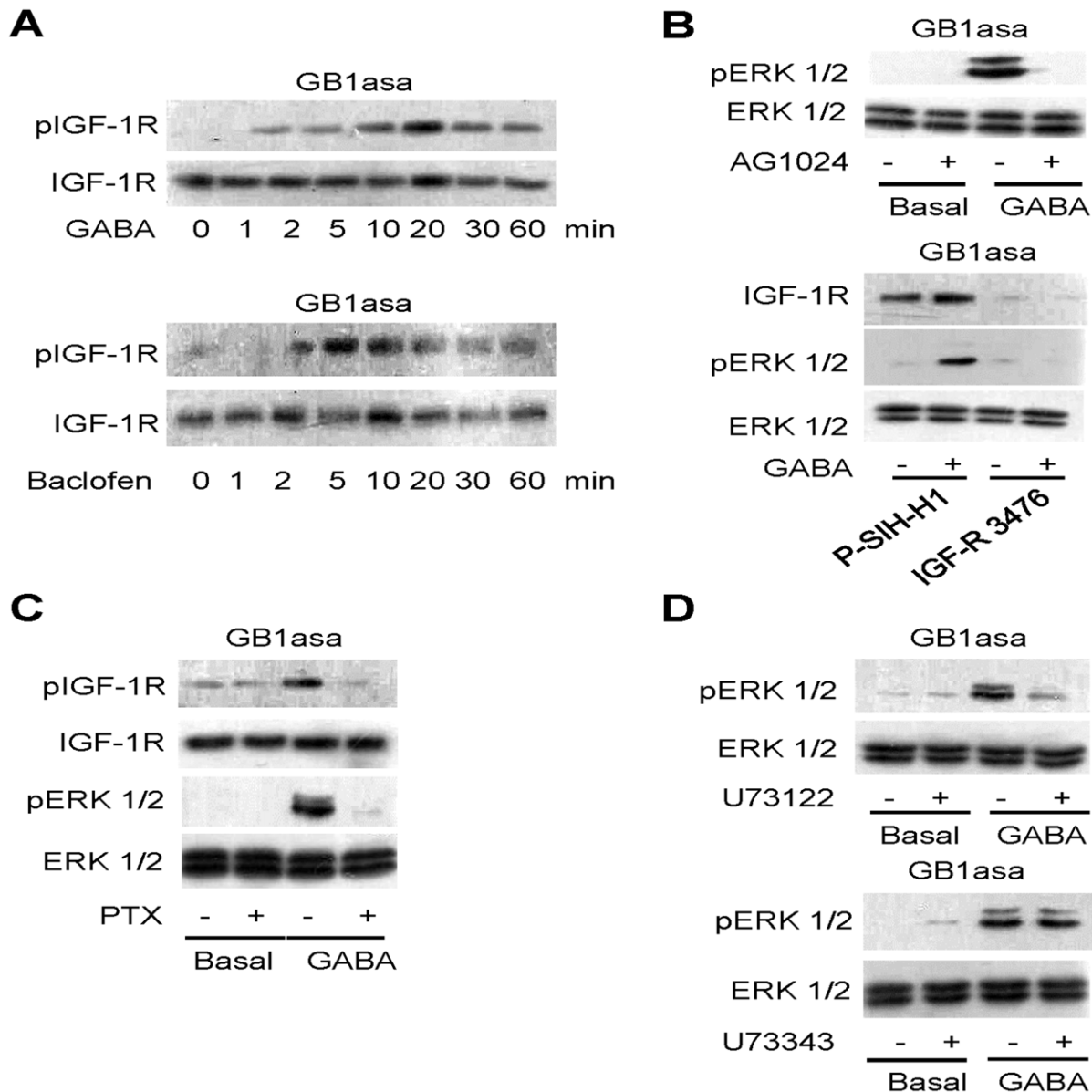


Figure 3. GB1asa-mediated ERK1/2 phosphorylation requires IGF-1R transactivation through Gi/o proteins and PLC pathway. (A) Effects of GABA (100 μ M) and Baclofen (100 μ M) on IGF-1R phosphorylation in cells overexpressing GB1asa for the indicated time course. (B) Effect of AG1024 (upper panel) and shRNA of IGF-1R (3476) (lower panel) on GABA-stimulated ERK1/2 phosphorylation. AG1024 (0.1 μ M; 60 min) is incubated before treatment with GABA (100 μ M; 5 min) in HEK293 cells overexpressing GB1asa. The shRNA knock-down assay is performed in MEF cells overexpressing GB1asa. (C) Effect of PTX on GABA-stimulated IGF-1R and ERK1/2 phosphorylation. PTX (200 ng/ml; 16 hrs) is incubated before and during treatment with GABA (100 μ M; 5 min). (D) Effect of U73122 and U73343 on GABA-stimulated ERK1/2 phosphorylation. U73122 (5 μ M; 60 min) or U73343 (5 μ M; 60 min) are incubated before treatment with GABA (100 μ M; 5 min). The western blots shown are representative of at least three separate experiments.

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induced ERK1/2 phosphorylation in GB1asa-transfected HEK293 cells (**Fig. 3B upper panel**). Furthermore, transfection of IGF-1R RNAi (IGF-R3476) also inhibited GABA-induced ERK1/2 phosphorylation by reducing endogenous IGF-1R expression in GB1asa-transfected MEF cells; whereas, scrambled RNAi (P-SIH-H1) had no such effect (**Fig. 3B lower panel**). In all, these results demonstrated that GB1asa induced ERK1/2 phosphorylation through IGF-1R transactivation.

We have previously shown that GABA_B receptor transactivated IGF-1R through Gi/o proteins [22]. Pertussis toxin (PTX) pretreatment (200 ng/ml) abolished GB1asa-induced IGF-1R

and ERK1/2 phosphorylation (**Fig. 3C**), suggesting that Gi/o proteins are involved in GB1asa-mediated IGF-1R transactivation, which in turn induces ERK1/2 phosphorylation.

Functional GABA_B receptor has also been shown to enhance phospholipase C (PLC) activity through the G $\beta\gamma$ subunits [22]. We examined the possible involvement of PLC on GB1asa-induced ERK1/2 phosphorylation. We found that pretreating cells with U73122, an inhibitor of PLC, but not its inactive analog U73343, completely abolished ERK1/2 phosphorylation (**Fig. 3D**), thus suggesting that GB1asa-induced ERK1/2 activation is mediated through PLC.

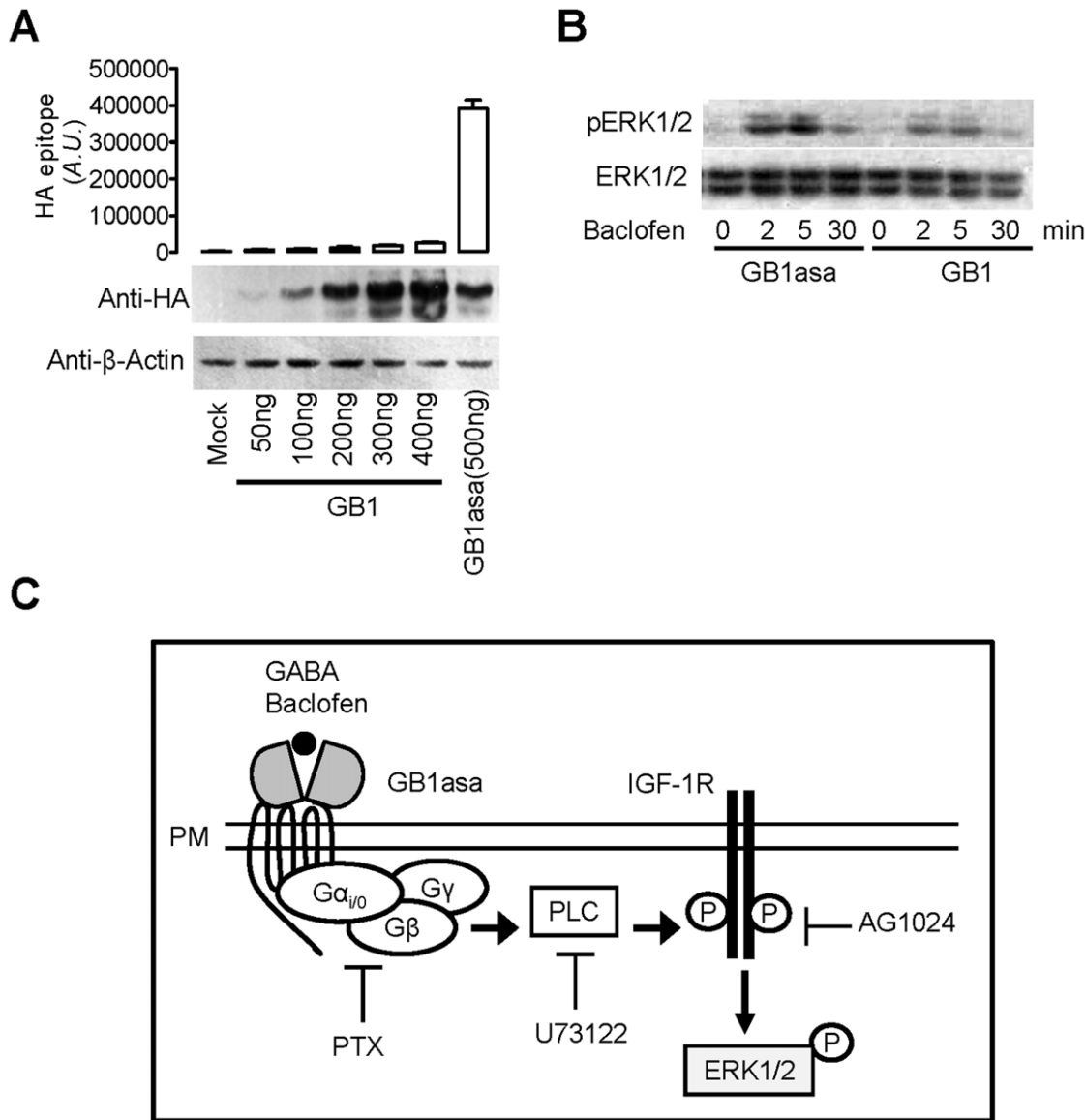


Figure 4. In the absence of GB2, GB1asa induction of ERK1/2 phosphorylation is greater than induction by wild type GB1. (A) Detection of the cell surface expression of GB1 or GB1asa (upper panel) and total expression by Western blots with anti-HA and anti- β -actin (lower panel). (B) Time course of the endogenous ERK1/2 phosphorylation induced by GABA (100 μ M) in the HEK293 cells transfected with GB1asa or GB1 alone. (C) Schematic representation of the signaling pathway mediated by GB1asa at the cell surface. Activation of ERK1/2 phosphorylation by GB1asa requires Gi/o proteins to activate PLC pathway, which in turn transactivates IGF-1R.
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In the Absence of GB2, GB1asa Induction of ERK1/2 Phosphorylation is Greater than Induction by Wild type GB1

It has been shown that intracellular GB1 alone induces ERK1/2 phosphorylation [26]. Here we compared the effect induced either by GB1 or GB1asa. We expressed either GB1asa, or GB1 wild type (GB1) with comparable expression levels, whereas only GB1asa could be expressed at the cell surface (**Fig 4A**). Under these conditions, GB1asa-induced ERK1/2 phosphorylation was much higher than GB1-induced ERK1/2 phosphorylation (**Fig 4B**), suggesting that cell surface located GB1 more efficiently induces ERK1/2 phosphorylation than intracellular GB1.

Discussion

In the present study, we demonstrated that a GB1 mutant, GB1asa, was able to act at the cell surface to induce ERK1/2 phosphorylation in a manner independent of GB2. Furthermore, we found that GB1asa-induced ERK1/2 phosphorylation acts via Gi/o-proteins and the PLC-mediated IGF-1R transactivation (**Fig 4C**).

Hetero-dimerization is a prerequisite for native GABA_B receptor function. GB2 masks the ER retention signal located at the C-terminus of GB1, thereby allowing GB1 to reach the cell surface [2,10–12]. However, the temporal and spatial expression profiles of GB1 and GB2 do not always coincide [1,3,13,18], suggesting that GB1 is functional in the absence of GB2. Furthermore, several lines of evidence suggest that GB1,

independent of GB2, interacts with Kir3.1 channels [27], induces ERK1/2 phosphorylation and regulates leptin mRNA expression [26,28]. However, all of these reports failed to detect obvious cell surface expression of GB1 in the absence of GB2. It is likely that GB1 alone has activity, possibly as a homodimer on the ER and ER-Golgi intermediate compartment [29]. However, it remains unclear how ligands can enter the cell to induce a rapid response through intracellular receptors. To circumvent these issues, we use the ER retention signal mutant of GB1, GB1asa, which can translocate to the cell surface independently of GB2, to show that GB1asa at the cell surface can act as a functional receptor to induce ERK1/2 phosphorylation. Furthermore, GB1asa-induced ERK1/2 phosphorylation is much higher than mediated by transfected wild type GB1, suggesting that cell surface expression of GB1 allows for more efficient ERK1/2 activation. How intracellular GB1 induces ERK1/2 phosphorylation remains for further investigation.

Even though GB1asa utilizes an artificial mechanism to allow translocation to the plasma membrane, it is probable that GB1 can be trafficked to the cell surface in the absence of GB2. It has been shown that a novel GPCR interacting scaffolding protein (GISP) can facilitate the translocation of GB1 to the cell surface by direct interaction with the coiled-coil domain of GB1 C-terminus, thus allowing translocation of GB1 independent of GB2 [30]. Furthermore, association of GB1 with the GABA_A receptor γ 2S subunit promotes GB1 cell surface expression in the absence of GB2 [31]. Further efforts need to be devoted to elucidating the mechanisms that allow traffic of GB1 towards the cell surface in the absence of GB2.

Our data shows that GB1asa at the cell surface in the absence of GB2 is sufficient to activate ERK1/2 via Gi/o proteins and PLC pathway, though with less efficiency than in the presence of GB2.

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