

# Activation of the Macrophage $\alpha 7$ Nicotinic Acetylcholine Receptor and Control of Inflammation

Carlos A. Báez-Pagán<sup>1</sup> · Manuel Delgado-Vélez<sup>1</sup> · José A. Lasalde-Dominicci<sup>1,2</sup>

Received: 20 November 2013 / Accepted: 12 March 2015  
© Springer Science+Business Media New York 2015

**Abstract** Inflammatory responses to stimuli are essential body defenses against foreign threats. However, uncontrolled inflammation may result in serious health problems, which can be life-threatening. The  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic acetylcholine receptor, a ligand-gated ion channel expressed in the nervous and immune systems, has an essential role in the control of inflammation. Activation of the macrophage  $\alpha 7$  receptor by acetylcholine, nicotine, or other agonists, selectively inhibits production of pro-inflammatory cytokines while leaving anti-inflammatory cytokines undisturbed. The neural control of this regulation pathway was discovered recently and it was named the cholinergic anti-inflammatory pathway (CAP). When afferent vagus nerve terminals are activated by cytokines or other pro-inflammatory stimuli, the message travels through the afferent vagus nerve, resulting in action potentials traveling down efferent vagus nerve fibers in a process that eventually leads to macrophage  $\alpha 7$  activation by acetylcholine and inhibition of pro-inflammatory cytokines production. The mechanism by which activation of  $\alpha 7$  in macrophages regulates pro-inflammatory responses is subject of intense

research, and important insights have thus been made. The results suggest that activation of the macrophage  $\alpha 7$  controls inflammation by inhibiting NF- $\kappa$ B nuclear translocation, and activating the JAK2/STAT3 pathway among other suggested pathways. While the  $\alpha 7$  is well characterized as a ligand-gated ion channel in neurons, whole-cell patch clamp experiments suggest that  $\alpha 7$ 's ion channel activity, defined as the translocation of ions across the membrane in response to ligands, is absent in leukocytes, and therefore, ion channel activity is generally assumed not to be required for the operation of the CAP. In this perspective, we briefly review macrophage  $\alpha 7$  activation as it relates to the control of inflammation, and broaden the current view by providing single-channel currents as evidence that the  $\alpha 7$  expressed in macrophages retains its ion translocation activity despite the absence of whole-cell currents. Whether this ion-translocating activity is relevant for the proper operation of the CAP or other important physiological processes remains obscure.

**Keywords** Alpha7 nAChR · Cholinergic anti-inflammatory pathway · Inflammation · Nicotinic acetylcholine receptor · Monocyte-derived macrophages (MDMs)

**Electronic supplementary material** The online version of this article (doi:10.1007/s11481-015-9601-5) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

✉ Carlos A. Báez-Pagán  
cbaezpagan@gmail.com

✉ José A. Lasalde-Dominicci  
jlasalde@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Department of Biology, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, PO Box 23360, San Juan, Puerto Rico 00931

<sup>2</sup> Department of Chemistry, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, PO Box 23346, San Juan, Puerto Rico 00931

## Introduction

Inflammation is the physiological response to invading pathogens and tissue damage. The inflammatory response leads to engagement of the immune system by the release of pro-inflammatory cytokines to the bloodstream. Well-controlled inflammation helps clear invading pathogens and promotes tissue repair thus reaching homeostasis. However, uncontrolled inflammation may generate more problems than it solves as it may cause tissue injury, organ dysfunction and

death. Known mediators of inflammation resolution include anti-inflammatory cytokines, which inhibit the effect of the pro-inflammatory cytokines; and lipoxins and resolvins, among others, that promote tissue healing. These mediators of inflammation resolution reach their target by diffusion and thus their intended effect does not take place immediately. One of the most interesting pathways for the regulation of inflammation is the cholinergic anti-inflammatory pathway (CAP) as it involves the nervous and immune systems. The anti-inflammatory effect of this pathway requires the release of neurotransmitters norepinephrine and acetylcholine, and it has the advantage that the anti-inflammatory signals can reach target organs to respond to threat immediately. The interplay of the nervous system and immune cells to fine-tune inflammatory responses is a relatively recent discovery and it is known as the inflammatory reflex. The efferent arm of the inflammatory reflex is called the cholinergic anti-inflammatory pathway (CAP).

### Cholinergic Anti-Inflammatory Pathway

The CAP has been the subject of intense research since its discovery more than a decade ago. The CAP comprises an interaction between the nervous and immune systems that regulate inflammatory responses. It fine-tunes the response to inflammatory stimuli to reach homeostasis and potentially avoid organ damage and death. The pathway is initiated through afferent vagus nerve stimulation by lipopolysaccharide (LPS), a bacterial endotoxin, or pro-inflammatory cytokines. The signal travels to the brain where it is processed in a muscarinic acetylcholine receptor-dependent mechanism. The integrated anti-inflammatory signal is conveyed through vagus nerve efferent fibers reaching the celiac-superior mesenteric plexus (CSMP). The vagus nerve efferent fiber originating in the dorsal motor nucleus is connected to the splenic nerve in the CSMP, and conveys the anti-inflammatory signal to the spleen, where the splenic nerve terminals release norepinephrine (NE) activating  $\beta 2$  adrenergic receptors in specialized T-lymphocytes that express choline acetyltransferase (ChAT<sup>+</sup> T cells) and synthesize ACh (Rosas-Ballina et al. 2011). The NE-activated ChAT<sup>+</sup> T cells travel to macrophages in the spleen and release ACh. Activation of the  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic receptors in macrophages by the ACh released by the ChAT<sup>+</sup> T cells causes a downregulation in the production and release of pro-inflammatory cytokines (Fig. 1), whereas anti-inflammatory cytokines levels are left unchanged (Borovikova et al. 2000).

### Nicotinic Acetylcholine Receptors

The nicotinic acetylcholine receptor (nAChR) is a member of the superfamily of Cys-loop ligand-gated ion channels which

includes the glycine receptors, the  $\gamma$ -aminobutyric acid type A receptors (GABA<sub>A</sub>) and the serotonin 5-HT<sub>3</sub> receptors (Cockcroft et al. 1990; Corringer et al. 2000; Karlin 2002; Le Novère et al. 2002). It is responsible for the relay of action potentials across cholinergic synapses through binding of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine (ACh) (Karlin 2002; Le Novère et al. 2002). Upon ACh binding, the nAChR undergoes conformational changes resulting in the opening of its cation-selective central pore. The nAChR is profusely expressed in the electric organs found in electric rays such as those from the genus *Torpedo* where they mediate the electric discharge used by rays to stun or kill prey (Cartaud et al. 2000).

The nAChR is an integral membrane protein composed of five subunits arranged as a five-member ring, the center of which is the receptor's cation-selective pore (Ochoa et al. 1989; Cockcroft et al. 1990; Galzi et al. 1991; Changeux et al. 1992; Karlin and Akabas 1995; Arias 1998; Changeux and Edelstein 1998; Corringer et al. 2000; Karlin 2002; Le Novère et al. 2002). Each subunit contains four hydrophobic transmembrane domains designated M1 through M4, a long extracellular N-terminal, a long cytoplasmic loop between M3 and M4 and a short extracellular C-terminus (DiPaola et al. 1989; Devillers-Thiéry et al. 1993). The nAChR is present in presynaptic neurons, postsynaptic neurons, muscle cells and electrocytes, the cells from the electric ray organ of electric rays (Galzi et al. 1991; Changeux and Edelstein 1998). In addition, nicotinic receptors have been identified in other cells such as those from the immune system, among others. Neuronal nAChRs may comprise only  $\alpha$  subunits (homooligomeric) or a combination of  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  subunits (heterooligomeric) (Galzi et al. 1991; Cooper et al. 1991; Zhang et al. 1994). Adding to this level of complexity, neuronal

**Fig. 1** The cholinergic anti-inflammatory reflex. Invasion of pathogens and tissue damage produce inflammatory responses that are regulated in part by the cholinergic anti-inflammatory reflex. Endotoxins or pro-inflammatory cytokines signal through vagus nerve afferent fibers to the brain wherein the message is processed, resulting in an anti-inflammatory signal transmitted through vagus nerve efferent fibers to the celiac plexus. The splenic nerve then activates T-cells that express choline acetyltransferase (ChAT<sup>+</sup> T-cells) in the spleen, which travel to macrophages and secrete ACh activating their  $\alpha 7$  receptors. The efferent arm of the anti-inflammatory reflex is known as the cholinergic anti-inflammatory pathway (CAP). Activation of the  $\alpha 7$  inhibits NF- $\kappa$ B by interfering with I- $\kappa$ B phosphorylation and NF- $\kappa$ B transcriptional activity (red lines). Activation of the  $\alpha 7$  has been proposed to inhibit STAT3 phosphorylation, leaving uSTAT3 available to bind NF- $\kappa$ B subunits p50 and p65, and avoiding their nuclear translocation (light green arrows). On the other hand, it has been reported that the anti-inflammatory effect that results from activation of  $\alpha 7$  is due to activation of the Jak2/STAT3 signaling pathway (yellow arrows). In a separate work, activated STAT3 was shown to induce the production of tristetraprolin (TTP), which is suggested as mediator of the anti-inflammatory effect (blue arrow). An additional proposed mechanism for the cholinergic regulation of pro-inflammatory responses comprise the upregulation of heme oxygenase-1 (HO-1) mediated by the activation of the phosphoinositol-3-kinase (PI3K)/Akt/Nrf-2 pathway (purple arrows)



permeability. It is involved in learning and memory, and implicated in neurological disorders such as Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, and schizophrenia that may result from decreased expression or functionality of this receptor. In addition, the  $\alpha 7$  is also expressed in non-neuronal cells. For instance, activation of the  $\alpha 7$  in lung and pancreatic cancers has been demonstrated to promote angiogenesis, cell-cycle progression and metastasis (Schaal and Chellappan 2014). Along this line,  $\alpha 7$  antagonists have been suggested as potential treatment for lung cancer (Brown et al. 2012). The  $\alpha 7$  is also expressed in cells from the immune system such as lymphocytes, monocytes and macrophages. Indeed, ACh-induced activation of  $\alpha 7$  in macrophages stimulate the so-called cholinergic anti-inflammatory pathway (Wang et al. 2003).

### Essential Role of the $\alpha 7$ Nicotinic Receptor in the CAP

The role of the  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic receptor is essential to the CAP-mediated regulation of pro-inflammatory responses (Wang et al. 2003). The CAP has been studied in human monocyte-derived macrophages (MDMs) exposed to LPS, wherein the concentration of pro-inflammatory cytokines TNF- $\alpha$ , IL-6, IL-1 $\beta$ , and anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10 was determined in MDMs exposed to ACh and pyridostigmine, an acetylcholinesterase inhibitor, before being challenged by the LPS inflammatory stimulus (Borovikova et al. 2000; Wang et al. 2003). These experiments demonstrated that, in MDMs pretreated with pyridostigmine and ACh, LPS exposure failed to increase the concentration of released TNF- $\alpha$ , IL-6, and IL-1 $\beta$  whereas the concentration of anti-inflammatory cytokine IL-10 remained unchanged. To ascertain the role of the  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic receptor in the anti-inflammatory effect of ACh on macrophages, experiments in which the  $\alpha 7$  receptor was either silenced or knocked-out were performed. These experimental approaches revealed that the  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic receptor is essential in the CAP-mediated regulation of inflammatory responses as the pathway ceases to work if macrophages are exposed to antisense oligonucleotides specific for the  $\alpha 7$ , or if the gene that codes for the  $\alpha 7$  receptor (*CHRNA7*) is knocked-out (Wang et al. 2003).

### Cholinergic Anti-Inflammatory Pathway Signaling

The underlying mechanism of the CAP has been the subject of intense research by several groups (Sundman and Olofsson 2014). Studies suggest potential mechanisms whereby activation of the  $\alpha 7$  expressed in macrophages suppresses the production and release of pro-inflammatory cytokines. For the most part, the proposed mechanisms implicate NF- $\kappa$ B and JAK2-STAT3 signaling pathways (see Fig. 1); however, more recent insights into the CAP underlying mechanism reveal roles for other molecules and signaling cascades.

### NF- $\kappa$ B Nuclear Translocation

Experiments demonstrated that activation of the  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic receptor in macrophages suppresses inflammation by inhibition of nuclear translocation of transcription factor NF- $\kappa$ B (Wang et al. 2004). The nuclear factor KB (NF- $\kappa$ B) transcription factor participates in the regulation of inflammatory processes by activating the expression of pro-inflammatory cytokines. It responds quickly to pro-inflammatory stimuli because it needs not be produced upon stimuli as it is maintained in the cytoplasm in an inactivated form. The NF- $\kappa$ B subunits p50 and p65 are maintained inactivated by binding to I- $\kappa$ B. When toll-like receptor (TLR4) is activated by ligands such as pro-inflammatory cytokines and LPS, I- $\kappa$ B is phosphorylated by IKK and signaled for degradation. With I- $\kappa$ B phosphorylated, NF- $\kappa$ B subunits p50 and p65 are free to translocate to the cell nucleus where they activate the transcription of pro-inflammatory cytokines, which amplify the inflammatory response mounted by the body in response to a pro-inflammatory stimulus (Fig. 1, *dark green arrows*). Therefore, an anti-inflammatory pathway meant to fine-tune the inflammatory response could do so by inhibiting the nuclear translocation of NF- $\kappa$ B. Indeed, research shows that activation of the  $\alpha 7$  and hence the cholinergic anti-inflammatory pathway, prevents NF- $\kappa$ B nuclear translocation in macrophages thus inhibiting the secretion of high mobility group box 1 (HMGB1), an important pro-inflammatory cytokine that serves as late mediator of sepsis (Wang et al. 2004). Furthermore, administration of nicotine to experimental models of sepsis reduced serum HMGB1 levels and improved survival rates (Wang et al. 2004). The exact mechanism whereby activation of  $\alpha 7$  in macrophages results in the blockade of NF- $\kappa$ B nuclear translocation is still not clear. However, nicotine-induced inhibition of I- $\kappa$ B phosphorylation by IKK and suppression of NF- $\kappa$ B transcriptional activity have been demonstrated (Fig. 1, *red lines*) (Yoshikawa et al. 2006). In addition, activation of the Jak2/STAT3 signaling cascade, discussed below, may converge with the NF- $\kappa$ B pathway to inhibit NF- $\kappa$ B (Peña et al. 2010). Indeed, it has been suggested that the  $\alpha 7$ -mediated inhibition of NF- $\kappa$ B may result from its interaction with unphosphorylated STAT3 (uSTAT3) (Yang et al. 2007; Peña et al. 2010).

### Jak2/STAT3 Signaling Cascade

Activation of the  $\alpha 7$  in macrophages may fine-tune pro-inflammatory responses by activating the Jak2/STAT3 signaling cascade. Two alternative models have been proposed to illustrate the role of the Jak2/STAT3 pathway in the CAP (de Jonge et al. 2005; Peña et al. 2010). The first model states that binding of cholinergic agonists to the  $\alpha 7$  results in the recruitment of Jak2 to the  $\alpha 7$ . Jak2 autophosphorylates itself, STAT3 is then recruited and phosphorylated by Jak2, and pSTAT3

form dimers that translocate to the nucleus (Fig. 1, *yellow arrows*). The mechanism by which pSTAT3 dimers impede the production and release of pro-inflammatory cytokines is not completely understood although STAT3 acts as negative regulator of the pro-inflammatory response (de Jonge et al. 2005). The authors of this study suspected that SOCS3 could be implicated in the mechanism because the expression of SOCS3 is activated by STAT3 and because SOCS3 inhibits the Jak2 phosphorylation of STAT3. Nevertheless, experiments demonstrated that blockade of the SOCS3 expression did not preclude the operation of the CAP. The authors thus concluded that the mechanism of the CAP is related to enhanced STAT3 instead of SOCS3 activation. A recent study shed light on the mechanism by which activation of STAT3 by nicotine may result in the observed anti-inflammatory effects (Joe et al. 2011). In experiments performed using U937 cells—a monocytic cell line—, nicotine-activated STAT3 was demonstrated to induce the production of tristetraprolin (TTP), an AU-rich element (ARE)-binding protein (Fig. 1, *blue arrows*). The induced production of TTP was suggested to generate the cholinergic anti-inflammatory effect by destabilizing pro-inflammatory transcripts containing AREs in the 3'-untranslated region (3'-UTR) (Joe et al. 2011).

Peña et al. introduced a novel perspective on the mechanism for the cholinergic regulation of inflammation that is related to the JAK2/STAT3 signaling cascade. In their model, unphosphorylated STAT3 (uSTAT3) and not pSTAT3 is responsible for the anti-inflammatory response (Peña et al. 2010). Their results suggest that the cholinergic anti-inflammatory response results from inhibition of STAT3 tyrosine phosphorylation (Peña et al. 2010) (Fig. 1, *light green arrows*). It is noteworthy that these experiments were performed using choline as agonist, whereas the previous study (de Jonge et al. 2005) implicating pSTAT3 as having a role in the underlying mechanism of the CAP were performed using nicotine as agonist. According to the authors, uSTAT3 interferes with the LPS-induced pro-inflammatory response via binding of NF- $\kappa$ B thus displacing I- $\kappa$ B and forming a complex (uSTAT3-NF- $\kappa$ B) that had been previously described in the literature (Yang et al. 2007). The authors speculated that the uSTAT3-NF- $\kappa$ B complex could prevent NF- $\kappa$ B activation thus bringing about the anti-inflammatory effect of cholinergic agonists.

### Heme Oxygenase-1 Induction

An alternative mechanism for the cholinergic regulation of pro-inflammatory responses is mediated by the upregulation of heme oxygenase-1 (HO-1) (Fig. 1, *purple arrow*). In experiments performed using RAW264.7 cells, nicotine dose-dependently increased HO-1 expression in an  $\alpha$ 7-dependent manner as the nicotine-induced

upregulation of HO-1 was obliterated when  $\alpha$ 7 was either antagonized using mecamylamine, or silenced by RNA interference. According to this study, the upregulation of HO-1 produced by activation of the  $\alpha$ 7 nicotinic receptor requires  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  influx because chelators EGTA and BABTA dose-dependently reduced the nicotine-induced HO-1 upregulation. The signaling cascade that is initiated by activation of the  $\alpha$ 7 receptor and the concomitant  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$  influx and that ends in an anti-inflammatory effect comprise activation of classical PKC by a  $\text{Ca}^{2+}$ -dependent mechanism, an increase in reactive oxygen species (ROS) production in a process involving NADPH oxidase, and the activation of the phosphoinositol-3-kinase (PI3K)/Akt/Nrf-2 pathway, which induces the expression of HO-1 in macrophages. The nicotine-induced upregulation of HO-1 was suggested to be an important step in the anti-inflammatory effect of nicotine in macrophages (Tsoyi et al. 2011).

### Alternative PI3K-Related Mechanisms

Recent studies shed additional light on alternative mechanisms of the cholinergic control of inflammation that involve PI3K signaling. In experiments performed in RAW264.7 cells stimulated with LPS, activation of the  $\alpha$ 7 with nicotine was demonstrated to suppress TLR4 expression through PI3K/Akt activation. These results were suggested to imply that the protective effect of nicotine could also be associated with inhibition of LPS-induced TLR4 overexpression (Kim et al. 2014). In addition, an alternative mechanism for the CAP was put forward involving interleukin-1 receptor-associated kinase M (IRAK-M), which is a negative regulator of innate TLR-mediated immune responses (Maldifassi et al. 2014). According to the proposed mechanism, nicotine induces the upregulation of IRAK-M in macrophages through a single (JAK2/PI3K/STAT3) or two convergent cascades (JAK2/STAT3 and PI3K/STAT3). The anti-inflammatory effect of  $\alpha$ 7 agonists is due, as proposed by the authors, to the upregulation of IRAK-M, which has an anti-inflammatory effect, and to the observed nicotine-induced reprogramming of macrophages to become refractory and hyporesponsive to TLR stimulation (Maldifassi et al. 2014).

### The $\alpha$ 7 nAChR Ion Translocation Activity

The  $\alpha$ 7 belongs to the family of ligand-gated ion channels and its ion translocation activity has been characterized extensively by electrophysiological methods in various expression systems including *Xenopus* oocytes, mammalian cells, and neurons (Papke 2014). Binding of agonists such as acetylcholine and nicotine produces conformational changes in the receptor

that open its central pore allowing the flow of cations from one side of the cell membrane to the other. The flow of positive charges along the electrochemical gradient changes the membrane potential. The  $\alpha 7$  is characterized by very fast desensitization and by its high calcium permeability. Therefore, activation of this nicotinic receptor can initiate calcium-dependent signaling cascades (Shen and Yakel 2009). While the ion translocation activity of the  $\alpha 7$  has been extensively studied by various electrophysiological techniques, whole-cell patch clamp studies performed in peripheral blood mononuclear cells (Villiger et al. 2002; Skok 2009) have failed to demonstrate  $\alpha 7$  macroscopic currents in these cells. While previous studies have reported the essential role of the  $\alpha 7$  in the regulation of inflammation (Wang et al. 2003) none have shown, to the best of our knowledge, evidence of  $\alpha 7$  ion translocation activity in macrophages.

In this perspective we provide single-channel currents suggesting that the  $\alpha 7$  expressed in human MDMs retains its ion channel activity—defined as the translocation of ions across the membrane in response to agonists—despite the absence of whole-cell currents.

## Materials and Methods

### Monocyte-Derived Macrophages Culture

All donors enrolled in the study signed the approved informed consent. Whole blood from healthy subjects was processed as described elsewhere (Delgado-Vélez et al. 2008). Peripheral blood mononuclear cells were counted by hemocytometer, adjusted to  $1 \times 10^6$  cells/ml and seeded in 12 mm round No. 1 coverslips (Warner Instruments). Monocytes were separated from lymphocytes by adherence and differentiated for 7–8 days in RPMI-1640 supplemented with 20 % inactivated FBS (Sigma-Aldrich), 10 % inactivated human serum (Sigma-Aldrich), 2 mg/ml MCSF (Invitrogen), and 1 % PenStrep (Sigma-Aldrich). All cultures were maintained at 37 °C with 5 % CO<sub>2</sub>.

### Cell-Attached Patch Clamp

MDMs were placed in a recording chamber containing bath solution (140 mM NaCl, 4 mM KCl, 2 mM CaCl<sub>2</sub>, 1 mM MgCl<sub>2</sub>, 10 mM glucose, 5 mM HEPES, pH 7.4) at 20 to 22 °C. The patch pipettes were pulled from thick-walled borosilicate glass (Sutter Instruments). Single-channel currents were recorded in the cell-attached patch clamp configuration using an Axopatch 200B amplifier (Molecular Devices, LLC), filtered at 5 kHz and digitalized at 50 kHz using the pClamp 10.4 Clampex software (Molecular Devices, LLC). The concentration of ACh, choline and PNU-120596 were 30  $\mu$ M, 15  $\mu$ M, and 10  $\mu$ M, respectively.

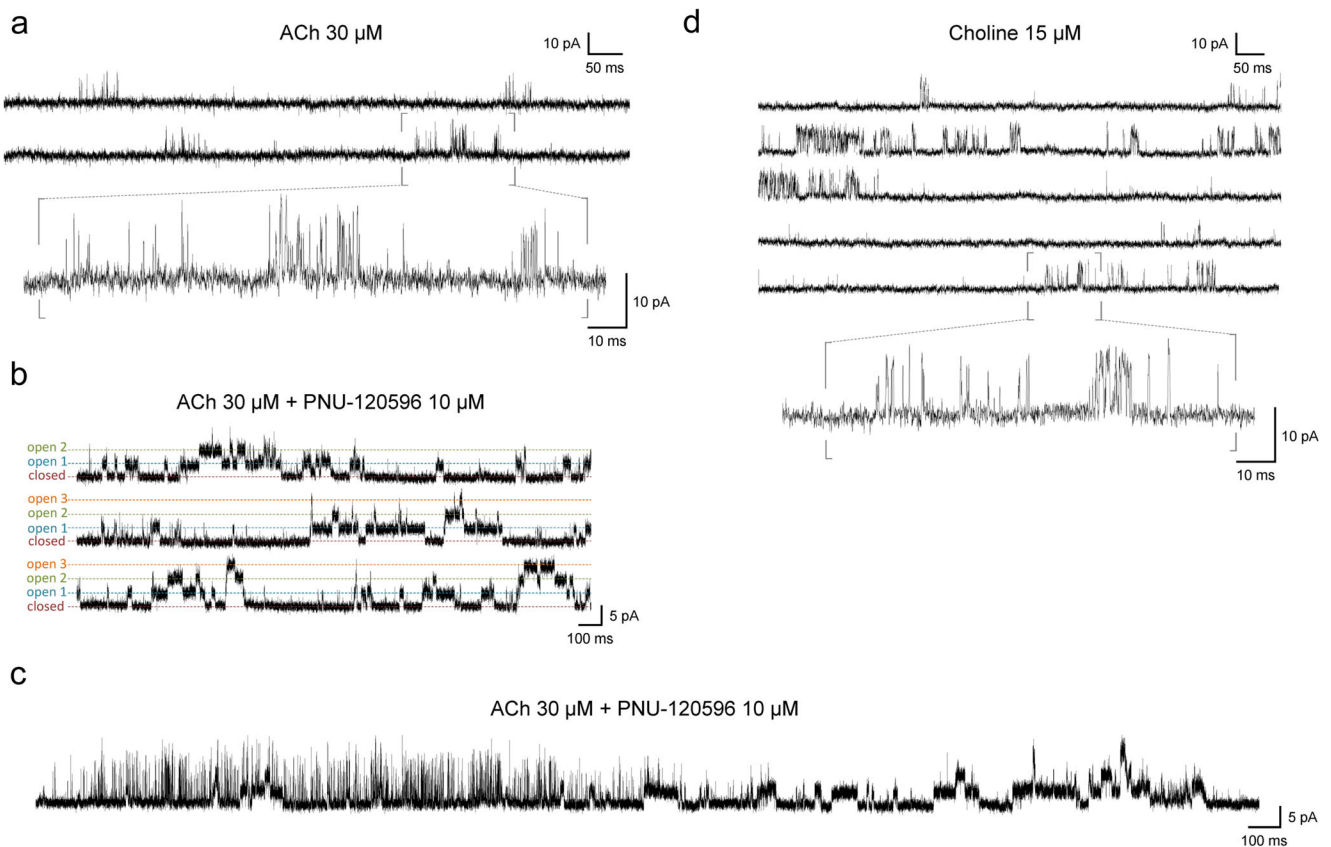
## Results and Discussion

It has been previously reported that ACh does not elicit macroscopic currents in immune cells that express the  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic receptor (Villiger et al. 2002; Skok 2009), an observation that we too have made (data not shown). Nonetheless, our results demonstrate that the macrophage  $\alpha 7$  retains its ion translocation functionality as judged by single-channel recordings performed on human MDMs. Figure 2 shows patch clamp experiments in the cell-attached configuration performed in MDMs which revealed single-channel currents that are consistent with published  $\alpha 7$  currents (daCosta et al. 2011). The  $\alpha 7$  is known for its fast desensitization, a characteristic that may hinder single-channel recordings. If the concentration of the agonist is too high, the receptor becomes desensitized, and if the concentration is too low, the frequency of single-channel openings may not be appreciable. After trying a few ACh concentrations in the 0.03–100  $\mu$ M range, the 30  $\mu$ M seemed to produce a good compromise. As displayed in Fig. 2a, these recordings revealed single-channel events of short durations characteristic of the  $\alpha 7$  receptor.

PNU-120596 is a type II positive allosteric modulator that extends the openings of the  $\alpha 7$  in addition to reverting the desensitized state (daCosta et al. 2011). Developed by Pfizer, PNU-120596 selectively modulates the activity of the  $\alpha 7$  leaving the functionality of other nicotinic receptors unmodified (Hurst et al. 2005). PNU-120596 (10  $\mu$ M) increased the frequency of ACh-induced openings in addition to a substantial prolongation of the open state suggesting that the single-channels correspond to the  $\alpha 7$  (Fig. 2b and c).

As shown on Fig. 2d, choline can activate the  $\alpha 7$  in human macrophages at a concentration of 15  $\mu$ M. Addition of the  $\alpha 7$  receptor antagonist  $\alpha$ -bungarotoxin obliterated the choline-elicited currents (See Online Resource 1). Furthermore, our preliminary data suggest that PNU-120596 extends the choline-induced  $\alpha 7$  single-channel openings in macrophages (See Online Resource 2). Choline is a full agonist of the  $\alpha 7$  and its concentration in the blood expands from 8.6 to 141.4  $\mu$ M (Alkondon et al. 1997; Lueders et al. 2007). Therefore, the result summarized on Fig. 2d implies that physiologically relevant concentrations of choline can activate the macrophage's  $\alpha 7$ .

While macroscopic currents are not observed in macrophages, it is possible that these may not be necessary to exert physiological responses. For instance, it is clear from the literature that activation of the macrophage  $\alpha 7$  is essential to reduce the secretion of pro-inflammatory cytokines through the CAP even when  $\alpha 7$  macroscopic currents have not been detected in these cells (Wang et al. 2003). However, the following question persists: Is ion channel activity—albeit not macroscopic currents—necessary for the role of the  $\alpha 7$  in the control of inflammation? Our results described on Fig. 2d suggest that the ion channel activity detected at the single-



**Fig. 2** Patch clamp characterization of the  $\alpha 7$  in MDMs. **a** Patch clamp experiments performed in the cell-attached configuration, using ACh (30  $\mu$ M) as agonist demonstrate that the  $\alpha 7$  expressed in MDMs function as ion channels. **b** and **c** Exposure to selective  $\alpha 7$  positive allosteric modulator PNU-120596 (10  $\mu$ M) results in prolonged openings confirming that currents are indeed from  $\alpha 7$ . **c**. This trace

shows how PNU-120596 first increases the frequency of openings consistent with previous observations by daCosta et al. 2011. All experiments were performed at a holding potential of  $-100$  mV. **d**. Patch clamp experiments performed in the cell-attached configuration, and using choline (15  $\mu$ M) as agonist further demonstrates that the  $\alpha 7$  expressed in MDMs behaves as a ligand-gated ion channel

channel level is not sufficient for CAP operation because choline elicits  $\alpha 7$  single-channel currents at a concentration of 15  $\mu$ M; however, choline does not result in a reduction in the release of TNF- $\alpha$  in human MDMs at concentrations below 1 mM (Parrish et al. 2008). Nevertheless, while ion channel currents at the single-channel level may not be sufficient to initiate the CAP, their potential role in regulating the CAP or other important physiological processes remain to be elucidated.

## Conclusion

Pathogens trigger immunological responses involving inflammatory processes orchestrated by pro-inflammatory and anti-inflammatory mediators. This formidable mechanism helps eliminate harmful agents preventing organ and systemic damage. However, exaggerated and uncontrolled sustained inflammatory responses may lead to serious health problems. The  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic receptor expressed in macrophages plays an essential role in the regulation of inflammatory processes.

The ionotropic activity of the  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic receptor has been ruled out as relevant to the operation of the CAP mainly on the grounds that macroscopic currents have not been recorded in nonexcitable immune cells (Villiger et al. 2002; Skok 2009; Papke 2014). Thus, metabotropic roles are usually ascribed to  $\alpha 7$ -mediated regulation of inflammatory responses through the CAP. The underlying mechanisms involve NF- $\kappa$ B, and JAK2/STAT3 signaling cascades (de Jonge et al. 2005). In addition, mechanisms involving TTP, HO-1, PI3K, TLR4 and IRAK-M have been implicated in the CAP (Tsoyi et al. 2011; Joe et al. 2011; Maldifassi et al. 2014; Kim et al. 2014).

While  $\alpha 7$  macroscopic currents are not observed in nonexcitable cells such as immune cells, these may not be essential for the potential ionotropic functions of the  $\alpha 7$  in these cells. For instance, translocated calcium through the  $\alpha 7$  ion channel can produce calcium-induced calcium release processes that could initiate calcium-dependent pathways (Gilbert et al. 2009; Shen and Yakel 2009). In our laboratory we have replicated the observation that MDMs do not produce ACh-activated macroscopic currents detectable in whole-cell patch clamp experiments (data not shown). Nevertheless, we

did observe the characteristic  $\alpha 7$  single-channel currents responsive to PNU-120596 when performing cell-attached single-channel patch clamp experiments (Fig. 2).

The difficulties associated with recording whole-cell  $\alpha 7$  currents in macrophages hints that this receptor may be subject to stringent regulation. The underlying mechanism behind the hypothesized regulation of the  $\alpha 7$  in MDMs may include intracellular regulation by threonine/serine (Russo and Taly 2012) or tyrosine (Charpantier et al. 2005) phosphorylation, or by cytoplasmic or membrane-anchored proteins (Paulo et al. 2009). In addition,  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic acetylcholine receptor activity can be regulated by cytoplasmic calcium concentrations (Shen and Yakel 2009). A compelling explanation to account for the lack of  $\alpha 7$  macroscopic currents in MDMs is provided by the demonstration that macrophages abundantly express a partial duplication of the gene that codes for the  $\alpha 7$  (*CHRNA7*), namely the *CHRFAM7A* (Benfante et al. 2011; de Lucas-Cerrillo et al. 2011). This gene encodes the dup $\alpha 7$  protein which has been demonstrated to serve as a negative regulator of the  $\alpha 7$  when co-expressed in *Xenopus* oocytes, although this view has been recently challenged using Neuro2a cells as expression system (Wang et al. 2014). Nevertheless, co-expression of  $\alpha 7$  and dup $\alpha 7$  in *Xenopus* oocytes in a 1:5 ratio results in a truly remarkable reduction in  $\alpha 7$  macroscopic currents. This reduction would be expected to be even greater in macrophages as the  $\alpha 7$  mRNA levels are only 7 % of the dup $\alpha 7$  mRNA levels (de Lucas-Cerrillo et al. 2011).

In conclusion, we provide electrophysiological evidence that the  $\alpha 7$  expressed in macrophages functions as an ion-conducting channel. Whether the observed ion translocation activity of the  $\alpha 7$  expressed in MDMs has a role in the underlying mechanism of the CAP remains obscured and would require further research to ascertain. Nevertheless, knowledge that the macrophage  $\alpha 7$  retains its ion translocation functionality implies that the ample research focused on modulating the ion channel activity of the  $\alpha 7$  receptor could be pertinent to the macrophage's  $\alpha 7$ .

**Acknowledgments** We are very grateful for Dr. Roger Papke's key suggestion of employing the positive allosteric modulator PNU-120596 in our cell-attached patch clamp experiments. This project was supported by the National Center for Research Resources (NCRR) grant U54RR026139, the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) grant 8U54MD007587-03, the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) grant U54NS043031, the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS) grant 1P20GM103642, and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) grant P30MH075673-07. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Manuel Delgado-Vélez was supported by the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus, Research Initiative for Scientific Enhancement (RISE) Program grant 2R25GM061151-5A1.

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

## References

- Alkondon M, Pereira EF, Cortes WS et al (1997) Choline is a selective agonist of  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic acetylcholine receptors in the rat brain neurons. *Eur J Neurosci* 9:2734–2742
- Arias HR (1998) Binding sites for exogenous and endogenous non-competitive inhibitors of the nicotinic acetylcholine receptor. *Biochim Biophys Acta* 1376:173–220
- Benfante R, Antonini RA, De Pizzol M et al (2011) Expression of the  $\alpha 7$  nAChR subunit duplicate form (CHRFAM7A) is down-regulated in the monocytic cell line THP-1 on treatment with LPS. *J Neuroimmunol* 230:74–84. doi:10.1016/j.jneuroim.2010.09.008
- Borovikova LV, Ivanova S, Zhang M et al (2000) Vagus nerve stimulation attenuates the systemic inflammatory response to endotoxin. *Nature* 405:458–462. doi:10.1038/35013070
- Brown KC, Lau JK, Dom AM et al (2012) MG624, an  $\alpha 7$ -nAChR antagonist, inhibits angiogenesis via the Egr-1/FGF2 pathway. *Angiogenesis* 15:99–114. doi:10.1007/s10456-011-9246-9
- Cartaud J, Cartaud A, Kordeli E et al (2000) The torpedo electrocyte: a model system to study membrane-cytoskeleton interactions at the postsynaptic membrane. *Microsc Res Tech* 49:73–83. doi:10.1002/(SICI)1097-0029(20000401)49:1<73::AID-JEMT8>3.0.CO;2-L
- Changeux JP, Edelstein SJ (1998) Allosteric receptors after 30 years. *Neuron* 21:959–980
- Changeux JP, Devillers-Thiéry A, Galzi JL, Bertrand D (1992) New mutants to explore nicotinic receptor functions. *Trends Pharmacol Sci* 13:299–301
- Charpantier E, Wiesner A, Huh K-H et al (2005)  $\alpha 7$  neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptors are negatively regulated by tyrosine phosphorylation and Src-family kinases. *J Neurosci* 25:9836–9849. doi:10.1523/JNEUROSCI.3497-05.2005
- Cockcroft VB, Osguthorpe DJ, Barnard EA et al (1990) Ligand-gated ion channels. Homology and diversity. *Mol Neurobiol* 4:129–169. doi:10.1007/BF02780338
- Cooper E, Couturier S, Ballivet M (1991) Pentameric structure and subunit stoichiometry of a neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptor. *Nature* 350:235–238. doi:10.1038/350235a0
- Corringer PJ, Le Novère N, Changeux JP (2000) Nicotinic receptors at the amino acid level. *Annu Rev Pharmacol Toxicol* 40:431–458. doi:10.1146/annurev.pharmtox.40.1.431
- daCosta CJB, Free CR, Corradi J et al (2011) Single-channel and structural foundations of neuronal  $\alpha 7$  acetylcholine receptor potentiation. *J Neurosci* 31:13870–13879. doi:10.1523/JNEUROSCI.2652-11.2011
- De Jonge WJ, van der Zanden EP, The FO et al (2005) Stimulation of the vagus nerve attenuates macrophage activation by activating the Jak2-STAT3 signaling pathway. *Nat Immunol* 6:844–851. doi:10.1038/ni1229
- De Lucas-Cerrillo AM, Maldifassi MC, Arnalich F et al (2011) Function of partially duplicated human  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic receptor subunit CHRFAM7A gene: potential implications for the cholinergic anti-inflammatory response. *J Biol Chem* 286:594–606. doi:10.1074/jbc.M110.180067
- Delgado-Vélez M, Lugo-Chinchilla A, Lizardo L et al (2008) Chronic exposure of human macrophages in vitro to morphine and methadone induces a putative tolerant/dependent state. *J Neuroimmunol* 196:94–100. doi:10.1016/j.jneuroim.2008.03.004
- Devillers-Thiéry A, Galzi JL, Eiselé JL et al (1993) Functional architecture of the nicotinic acetylcholine receptor: a prototype of ligand-gated ion channels. *J Membr Biol* 136:97–112
- DiPaola M, Czajkowski C, Karlin A (1989) The sidedness of the COOH terminus of the acetylcholine receptor delta subunit. *J Biol Chem* 264:15457–15463
- Galzi JL, Revah F, Bessis A, Changeux JP (1991) Functional architecture of the nicotinic acetylcholine receptor: from electric organ to brain.

- Annu Rev Pharmacol Toxicol 31:37–72. doi:[10.1146/annurev.pa.31.040191.000345](https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.pa.31.040191.000345)
- Gilbert D, Lecchi M, Arnaudeau S et al (2009) Local and global calcium signals associated with the opening of neuronal alpha7 nicotinic acetylcholine receptors. *Cell Calcium* 45:198–207. doi:[10.1016/j.ceca.2008.10.003](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ceca.2008.10.003)
- Hurst RS, Hajós M, Raggenbass M et al (2005) A novel positive allosteric modulator of the alpha7 neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptor: in vitro and in vivo characterization. *J Neurosci* 25:4396–4405. doi:[10.1523/JNEUROSCI.5269-04.2005](https://doi.org/10.1523/JNEUROSCI.5269-04.2005)
- Itier V, Bertrand D (2001) Neuronal nicotinic receptors: from protein structure to function. *FEBS Lett* 504:118–125
- Joe Y, Kim HJ, Kim S et al (2011) Tristetraprolin mediates anti-inflammatory effects of nicotine in lipopolysaccharide-stimulated macrophages. *J Biol Chem* 286:24735–24742. doi:[10.1074/jbc.M110.204859](https://doi.org/10.1074/jbc.M110.204859)
- Kalamida D, Poulas K, Avramopoulou V et al (2007) Muscle and neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptors. Structure, function and pathogenicity. *FEBS J* 274:3799–3845. doi:[10.1111/j.1742-4658.2007.05935.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1742-4658.2007.05935.x)
- Karlin A (2002) Emerging structure of the nicotinic acetylcholine receptors. *Nat Rev Neurosci* 3:102–114. doi:[10.1038/nrn731](https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn731)
- Karlin A, Akabas MH (1995) Toward a structural basis for the function of nicotinic acetylcholine receptors and their cousins. *Neuron* 15:1231–1244
- Kim T-H, Kim S-J, Lee S-M (2014) Stimulation of the  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic acetylcholine receptor protects against sepsis by inhibiting Toll-like receptor via phosphoinositide 3-kinase activation. *J Infect Dis* 209:1668–1677. doi:[10.1093/infdis/jit669](https://doi.org/10.1093/infdis/jit669)
- Le Novère N, Corringer PJ, Changeux JP (1999) Improved secondary structure predictions for a nicotinic receptor subunit: incorporation of solvent accessibility and experimental data into a two-dimensional representation. *Biophys J* 76:2329–2345. doi:[10.1016/S0006-3495\(99\)77390-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0006-3495(99)77390-X)
- Le Novère N, Corringer P-J, Changeux J-P (2002) The diversity of subunit composition in nAChRs: evolutionary origins, physiologic and pharmacologic consequences. *J Neurobiol* 53:447–456. doi:[10.1002/neu.10153](https://doi.org/10.1002/neu.10153)
- Lueders C, Danne O, Müller C et al (2007) Evaluation of a chemiluminescent assay for analysis of choline in human plasma and whole blood. *Lab Med* 38:726–728. doi:[10.1309/1N2NAYWQ53QVR6FX](https://doi.org/10.1309/1N2NAYWQ53QVR6FX)
- Maldifassi MC, Atienza G, Amalich F et al (2014) A new IRAK-M-mediated mechanism implicated in the anti-inflammatory effect of nicotine via  $\alpha 7$  nicotinic receptors in human macrophages. *PLoS ONE* 9:e108397. doi:[10.1371/journal.pone.0108397](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0108397)
- Ochoa EL, Chattopadhyay A, McNamee MG (1989) Desensitization of the nicotinic acetylcholine receptor: molecular mechanisms and effect of modulators. *Cell Mol Neurobiol* 9:141–178
- Papke RL (2014) Merging old and new perspectives on nicotinic acetylcholine receptors. *Biochem Pharmacol* 89:1–11. doi:[10.1016/j.bcp.2014.01.029](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bcp.2014.01.029)
- Parrish WR, Rosas-Ballina M, Gallowitsch-Puerta M et al (2008) Modulation of TNF release by choline requires alpha7 subunit nicotinic acetylcholine receptor-mediated signaling. *Mol Med* 14:567–574. doi:[10.2119/2008-00079.Parrish](https://doi.org/10.2119/2008-00079.Parrish)
- Paterson D, Nordberg A (2000) Neuronal nicotinic receptors in the human brain. *Prog Neurobiol* 61:75–111
- Paulo JA, Brucker WJ, Hawrot E (2009) Proteomic analysis of an alpha7 nicotinic acetylcholine receptor interactome. *J Proteome Res* 8:1849–1858. doi:[10.1021/pr800731z](https://doi.org/10.1021/pr800731z)
- Peña G, Cai B, Liu J et al (2010) Unphosphorylated STAT3 modulates alpha 7 nicotinic receptor signaling and cytokine production in sepsis. *Eur J Immunol* 40:2580–2589. doi:[10.1002/eji.201040540](https://doi.org/10.1002/eji.201040540)
- Rosas-Ballina M, Olofsson PS, Ochani M et al (2011) Acetylcholine-synthesizing T cells relay neural signals in a vagus nerve circuit. *Science* 334:98–101. doi:[10.1126/science.1209985](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1209985)
- Russo P, Taly A (2012)  $\alpha 7$ -Nicotinic acetylcholine receptors: an old actor for new different roles. *Curr Drug Targets* 13:574–578
- Schaal C, Chellappan SP (2014) Nicotine-mediated cell proliferation and tumor progression in smoking-related cancers. *Mol Cancer Res* 12:14–23. doi:[10.1158/1541-7786.MCR-13-0541](https://doi.org/10.1158/1541-7786.MCR-13-0541)
- Shen J, Yakel JL (2009) Nicotinic acetylcholine receptor-mediated calcium signaling in the nervous system. *Acta Pharmacol Sin* 30:673–680. doi:[10.1038/aps.2009.64](https://doi.org/10.1038/aps.2009.64)
- Skok MV (2009) Editorial: To channel or not to channel? Functioning of nicotinic acetylcholine receptors in leukocytes. *J Leukoc Biol* 86:1–3. doi:[10.1189/JLB.0209106](https://doi.org/10.1189/JLB.0209106)
- Sundman E, Olofsson PS (2014) Neural control of the immune system. *Adv Physiol Educ* 38:135–139
- Tsoyi K, Jang HJ, Kim JW et al (2011) Stimulation of alpha7 nicotinic acetylcholine receptor by nicotine attenuates inflammatory response in macrophages and improves survival in experimental model of sepsis through heme oxygenase-1 induction. *Antioxid Redox Signal* 14:2057–2070. doi:[10.1089/ars.2010.3555](https://doi.org/10.1089/ars.2010.3555)
- Villiger Y, Szanto I, Jaconi S et al (2002) Expression of an alpha7 duplicate nicotinic acetylcholine receptor-related protein in human leukocytes. *J Neuroimmunol* 126:86–98
- Wang H, Yu M, Ochani M et al (2003) Nicotinic acetylcholine receptor alpha7 subunit is an essential regulator of inflammation. *Nature* 421:384–388. doi:[10.1038/nature01339](https://doi.org/10.1038/nature01339)
- Wang H, Liao H, Ochani M et al (2004) Cholinergic agonists inhibit HMGB1 release and improve survival in experimental sepsis. *Nat Med* 10:1216–1221. doi:[10.1038/nm1124](https://doi.org/10.1038/nm1124)
- Wang Y, Xiao C, Indersmitten T et al (2014) The duplicated  $\alpha 7$  subunits assemble and form functional nicotinic receptors with the full-length  $\alpha 7$ . *J Biol Chem* 289:26451–26463. doi:[10.1074/jbc.M114.582858](https://doi.org/10.1074/jbc.M114.582858)
- Yang J, Liao X, Agarwal MK et al (2007) Unphosphorylated STAT3 accumulates in response to IL-6 and activates transcription by binding to NFkappaB. *Genes Dev* 21:1396–1408. doi:[10.1101/gad.1553707](https://doi.org/10.1101/gad.1553707)
- Yoshikawa H, Kurokawa M, Ozaki N et al (2006) Nicotine inhibits the production of proinflammatory mediators in human monocytes by suppression of I-kappaB phosphorylation and nuclear factor-kappaB transcriptional activity through nicotinic acetylcholine receptor alpha7. *Clin Exp Immunol* 146:116–123. doi:[10.1111/j.1365-2249.2006.03169.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2249.2006.03169.x)
- Zhang ZW, Vijayaraghavan S, Berg DK (1994) Neuronal acetylcholine receptors that bind alpha-bungarotoxin with high affinity function as ligand-gated ion channels. *Neuron* 12:167–177