

GNB5 Mutations Cause an Autosomal-Recessive Multisystem Syndrome with Sinus Bradycardia and Cognitive Disability

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Abstract

GNB5 encodes the G protein β subunit 5 and is involved in inhibitory G protein signaling. Here, we report mutations in GNB5 that are associated with heart-rate disturbance, eye disease, intellectual disability, gastric problems, hypotonia, and seizures in nine individuals from six families. We observed an association between the nature of the variants and clinical severity; individuals with loss-of-function alleles had more severe symptoms, including substantial developmental delay, speech defects, severe hypotonia, pathological gastro-esophageal reflux, retinal disease, and sinus-node dysfunction, whereas related heterozygotes harboring missense variants presented with a clinically milder phenotype. Zebrafish *gnb5* knockouts recapitulated the phenotypic spectrum of affected individuals, including cardiac, neurological, and ophthalmological abnormalities, supporting a direct role of GNB5 in the control of heart rate, hypotonia, and vision.

Reference

LODDER, Elisabeth M, DE NITTIS, Pasquelena, KOOPMAN, Charlotte D & Collaboration, FISH, Richard (Collab.), *et al.* GNB5 Mutations Cause an Autosomal-Recessive Multisystem Syndrome with Sinus Bradycardia and Cognitive Disability. *American journal of human genetics*, 2016, vol. 99, no. 3, p. 704-710

PMID : 27523599

DOI : 10.1016/j.ajhg.2016.06.025

Available at:

<http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:86476>

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***GNB5* variants cause a novel multisystem syndrome associated with sinus bradycardia and intellectual disability**

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Running title: *GNB5* variants cause HEIGHTS syndrome

Keywords: whole exome sequencing, heart rate, intellectual disability, hypotonia, G-protein signaling, parasympathetic system

Abstract

We report a new genetic multi-system disorder caused by mutations affecting inhibitory G-protein signaling. Whole exome sequencing of 9 individuals from 6 unrelated families, from 4 different continents, with overlapping clinical manifestations identified bi-allelic loss-of-function and missense variants in *GNB5* that encodes the G-protein β subunit 5. This autosomal recessive disease combines the very unique finding of early-onset Heart rate disturbance, as well as Eye disease, Intellectual disability, Gastric problems, HypoTonia and Seizures; thus we propose the acronym HEIGHTS. A striking association between the nature of the variants and clinical severity of the syndrome was observed: individuals with loss-of-function alleles had more severe symptoms, including significant developmental delay, speech defects, severe hypotonia, pathological gastro-esophageal reflux, retinal disease and sinus node dysfunction, whereas carriers of a homozygous missense variant presented with a clinically milder phenotype. Zebrafish knocked out for *gnb5* faithfully recapitulated the phenotypic spectrum of affected individuals, including cardiac, neurological and ophthalmological abnormalities, thus providing further experimental evidence for a direct role of *GNB5* in the control of heart rate, hypotonia, and vision.

Main text

Heterotrimeric G proteins trigger a signal transduction cascade composed of α , β , and γ subunits. They are associated with G protein-coupled receptors (GPCRs) in modulating an array of cellular functions, including release of a multitude of hormones and growth factors, regulation of cell contraction and migration, as well as cell growth and differentiation during development^{1-3 4}. G-protein coupled signaling plays a crucial role in neuronal communication, including regulation of the antagonistic effects of the parasympathetic and sympathetic branches of the autonomic nervous system throughout the body. We report a new genetic disorder caused by mutations affecting *GNB5* (MIM: 604447), encoding guanine nucleotide binding protein, subunit beta 5, with disease manifestation in multiple systems.

We identified nine affected individuals (six females and three males) from six unrelated families presenting with a clinical overlap of neurological and cardiac conduction defects. Shared phenotypic features representing the cardinal characteristics of this syndrome include global developmental delay, seizures, generalized hypotonia, retinal disease and the uncommon feature of early-onset **sinus** node dysfunction (**Table 1**). Additional clinical investigations and diagnostic studies did not show any evidence of structural central nervous system, ocular and cardiac anomalies. Affected individuals from four of the six families (families A-D) demonstrated the severe end of the disease spectrum with significant cognitive deficits, delayed motor development, severe hypotonia, retinal disease, pathological gastro-esophageal reflux, and sinus node dysfunction. Families E and F presented with a milder phenotype including mild intellectual impairment, language delay and bradycardia (**Figure 1, Table 1, Supplemental text**). We suggest describing this syndrome, and aggregate of rare endophenotypes, associated with pathogenic variation in the same gene, with the acronym “HEIGHTS” (Heart and Eye disease, Intellectual disability, Gastric problems, HypoTonia and Seizures).

As no potentially pathogenic genomic structural abnormalities were identified by array-CGH and karyotyping of the affected subjects, we applied whole

exome sequencing (WES) to all the affected individuals and their healthy parents. Families were recruited in Italy (family A), Brazil (B and F), the United States of America (C and D) and the Netherlands (E). The institutional review boards of the IRCCS Casa Sollievo Della Sofferenza Hospital, the “Hospital das Clínicas da Universidade de São Paulo”, the Baylor College of Medicine, the Amsterdam Academic Medical Center and the University of Lausanne approved this study. Participants were enrolled after written informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians. The clinical evaluation included medical history interviews, a physical examination and review of medical records. To uncover genetic variants associated with the complex phenotype shown by the nine affected subjects we sequenced their exomes and that of their parents. DNA libraries were prepared from blood-derived genomic DNAs by standard procedures. Exomes were captured and sequenced using different platforms to reach 50-120-fold coverage on average (**Supplemental text**). Variants were called as previously described⁵⁻⁷. Variants were filtered based on inheritance patterns including autosomal recessive, X-linked and *de novo*/autosomal dominant. Variants with MAF<0.05% in control cohorts (dbSNP, the 1000 genome project, NHLBI GO Exome Sequencing Project, the Exome Aggregation Consortium database and our in-house databases) and predicted to be deleterious by SIFT⁸, PolyPhen-2⁹ and/or UMD predictor¹⁰ were prioritized.

As some families reported a potential history of consanguinity (family B, C and F, **Figure 1; Table 1**) we filtered variants using Mendelian expectations for the assumption of a rare autosomal recessive trait. We found only the *GNB5* gene compliant with Mendelian expectations and bearing bi-allelic putative deleterious variants in all affected individuals (**Figure 1, Table S1**). Sanger sequencing in each family confirmed the anticipated segregation of the *GNB5* variants. Strikingly, the variants found in the severely affected individuals (families A-D) were predicted to be loss-of-function (LoF) alleles, whereas the more mildly affected individuals from families E and F were homozygous for the same missense variant, c.242C>T (NM_006578.3); p.(S81L) (**Figure 1, S1a**). In families B, C and D the affected individuals were homozygous for splice variants (c.249+1G>T; p.(D84Lfs31X)) and (c.249G+3A>G;

p.(D84Vfs31X)) and a nonsense variant (c.906C>G; p.(Y302X)), respectively (**Figure 1, S1a; Table S1**). In family A, the affected siblings were compound heterozygous for a maternally inherited nonsense variant (c.994C>T; p.(R332X)) and a paternally inherited splice-site change (c.249G>A; p.(Q83Q)), that are predicted by conceptual translation to likely trigger nonsense-mediated decay of the corresponding transcripts; a hypothesis that was confirmed experimentally (**Figure 1, S1a, S2; Supplemental text**).

The five *GNB5* LoF variants identified in families A-D are either not present or present with $AF \leq 8.25 \times 10^{-6}$ (allele frequency) in ExAC (Exome Aggregation Consortium, Cambridge, MA; Version 0.3.1) (**Table S1**). Correspondingly, LoF variants in *GNB5* are underrepresented compared to expectation (8/19.1 respectively) in ExAC, suggesting selective pressure against such variants. The p.(S81L) missense variant identified in family E of Moroccan ancestry and family F of Brazilian ancestry has an $AF < 5 \times 10^{-5}$ (6/121,000) in the human population and 4.3×10^{-4} in Latinos (5/11,574). A sample of individuals from Morocco identified a prevalence of 1 out of 1260 (7.94×10^{-4}) for this allele. Pathogenicity of this variant is further supported by three-dimensional representation of the encoded protein complexed with RGS9, a member of the R7-subfamily of Regulators of G-protein Signaling (RGS) proteins and common binding partner of *GNB5*. *GNB5* is folded into essentially identical seven-bladed β -propellers (WD40 repeated domains) with equivalent N-terminal helical extensions¹¹. Replacement of the evolutionary conserved S81 (**Figure S1b**) by Leucine will induce localized structural changes in the immediate vicinity of this residue, which could impair both the central pore of the β -propeller and the binding kinetics of RGS proteins (**Figure 2, S3, S4; Supplemental text**).

In line with the clinical presentation of HEIGHTS syndrome, *Gnb5* ablation in mice resulted in marked neurobehavioral abnormalities, including learning deficiencies, hyperactivity, impaired gross motor coordination, abnormal gait¹², defective visual adaptation¹³ and perturbed development and functioning of retinal bipolar cells¹⁴. Correspondingly, mice lacking *Rgs6*, the *GNB5*-dependent RGS protein enriched in heart tissue, exhibit bradycardia

and hypersensitivity to parasympathomimetics^{15; 16}. To independently investigate the functional effects of HEIGHTS-associated variation of *GNB5* in the full phenotypic spectrum of subjects reported herein, we engineered a zebrafish model knocked out for *gnb5*.

CRISPR/Cas9 genome editing was used to generate zebrafish with LoF mutations in *gnb5a* and *gnb5b*, the two *GNB5* paralogs present in the genome of this teleost (**Figure S5**). We identified stable lines with a +7bp insertion in *gnb5a* and a -8bp +15bp deletion/insertion in *gnb5b* causing a frameshift and premature truncation of the encoded proteins, respectively (**Figure S6**). It was anticipated that *gnb5a* and *gnb5b* might have redundant functions, which was confirmed by the absence of overt phenotypes in embryos homozygous for either LoF mutations. In-crosses of *gnb5a/gnb5b* double heterozygous carriers resulted in clutches of embryos containing the expected 6.25% of *gnb5a^{-/-}/gnb5b^{-/-}* double mutants (henceforth referred to as *gnb5* mutants). Consistent with HEIGHTS syndrome manifestations, zebrafish mutants have no striking dysmorphic features (**Figure S6d**), but the larvae generally die 7-14 days post fertilization (dpf).

To assess the putative involvement of *GNB5* in autonomic nervous system functions, we investigated the *GNB5/RGS/GIRK* channel pathway. As *GNB5* recruits RGS proteins to G-protein-coupled inward rectifier potassium (*GIRK*) channels involved in the hyperpolarization of cell membranes^{16; 17}, we first investigated if LoF of *GNB5* could delay *GIRK* channel deactivation kinetics, increase hyperpolarization time of cell membranes, and impair cell responsiveness to new stimuli. Carbachol is a parasympathomimetic compound that activates acetylcholine receptors of the heart (NCBI, PubChem) and the *GNB5/RGS/GIRK* channel pathway. Treatment of *gnb5* mutant larvae with carbachol resulted in a strong decrease of the heart rate, whereas it had little effect on wild-type and sibling larvae (**Figure 3**), consistent with loss of negative regulation of the cardiac *GIRK* channel by *GNB5/RGS*. In contrast, treatment with the sympathetic agonist isoproterenol resulted in an increased heart rate that was similar in wild-type, sibling and *gnb5* mutant larvae (**Figure 3**). These results indicate that *GNB5* is crucial for

the parasympathetic control of heart rate, but not for sympathetic control suggesting that lack of *GNB5* is associated with extreme bradycardia at rest. Correspondingly, HEIGHTS individuals present severe bradycardia at rest (minimal observed heart rates of <25bpm (beats per minute)) combined with a normal chronotropic response (max heart rates >150 bpm).

The severe muscle hypotonia reported in HEIGHTS individuals could result from GIRK-mediated hyperpolarization of neurons controlling skeletal muscle tone. *gnb5* mutant embryos hatched normally from their chorion, a process that requires muscle contraction, but their swimming behavior appeared abnormal at 3 dpf. To investigate whether this abnormal behavior was linked to neurologic dysfunction and hypotonia, we examined the touch-evoked escape response. We anticipated that neurons would only become fully hyperpolarized after an initial stimulus and thus presented the embryos with three consecutive tactile stimuli. Whereas wild-type larvae rapidly swam away in response to repeated tactile stimuli, *gnb5* mutants showed a significant decrease in swimming distance and swimming speed at stimulus two ($P \leq 0.0001$) and three ($P \leq 0.01$), but not after the first stimulus (**Figure 4a-c**). Accordingly, *gnb5* mutant larvae were predominantly unresponsive to repeated tactile stimuli (**Supplemental movies**). To test whether this abnormal escape response is the consequence of neurologic dysfunction rather than reduced muscle function, we performed a tail movement assay. 5 dpf larvae were given a strong tactile stimulus while recording the movement of the tail (**Figure 4d-e**). No significant difference was detected in the maximum tail angle between wild-type and *gnb5* mutant larvae (**Figure 4e**). These results indicate that the tail muscles of *gnb5* mutants are fully functional and that the abnormal escape response is associated with neurological dysfunction and possibly muscle hypotonia.

Since HEIGHTS individuals have visual problems, including nystagmus, we investigated the visual system by measuring the optokinetic response (OKR) of *gnb5* mutant larvae. When wild-type larvae were placed in a drum with rotating light stimulus (**Figure S7a**), the OKR consists of smooth pursuit eye movements followed by rapid rest saccades in the opposite direction (**Figure**

S7b, Supplemental movies). In contrast, OKR was completely absent in *gnb5* mutant larvae although their eyes showed no morphological abnormalities and could make eye movements (**Figure S7c, Supplemental movies**). This indicates that the eye muscles are functional in *gnb5* mutants but that proper eye-movement control depends on *GNB5*. Overall these data showed that *gnb5* mutants faithfully recapitulate the phenotypic spectrum of HEIGHTS patients, including cardiac, neurologic and ophthalmologic abnormalities.

These results for the first time provide evidence for a direct role of *GNB5* in the control of heart rate, motor capacity, and vision. Whereas the $G\beta_{1-4}$ are highly homologous and widely expressed¹⁸, $G\beta_5$ exhibits much less homology with the other isoforms and is preferentially expressed in the brain and nervous system^{19; 20}.

Germline *de novo* *GNB1* variants cause severe neurodevelopmental disability²¹, hypotonia and seizures. *GNB3* bi-allelic LoF has been linked to stationary night blindness in human²², retinal degeneration in chicken²³ and reduced cone sensitivity and mild bradycardia in mice^{24; 25}. A single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) in *GNB3* was associated with postural tachycardia syndrome²⁶, incidence of cardiovascular disease and stroke²⁷. Similarly, *GNB2* and *GNB4* map to loci governing heart rate on chromosome 7 and 3, respectively^{28; 29}. We hereby demonstrate that bi-allelic LoF and missense variants in *GNB5* cause the multisystem HEIGHTS syndrome with features that include global developmental delay, sinus node dysfunction, seizures, eye abnormalities, gastric problems and generalized hypotonia. We highlight the importance of *GNB5* for neuronal signaling, including the regulation of the antagonistic effects of the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous system.

Supplemental Data

Supplemental Data include Supplemental Material and Methods, Supplemental Text, seven figures and one table.

Competing interest

JRL has stock ownership in 23andMe, is a paid consultant for Regeneron Pharmaceuticals, has stock options in Lasergen, Inc., is a member of the Scientific Advisory Board of Baylor Miraca Genetics Laboratories, and is a co-inventor on multiple United States and European patents related to molecular diagnostics for inherited neuropathies, eye diseases and bacterial genomic fingerprinting. Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) and Miraca Holdings Inc. have formed a joint venture with shared ownership and governance of the Baylor Miraca Genetics Laboratories (BMGL), which performs clinical exome sequencing. The Department of Molecular and Human Genetics at Baylor College of Medicine derives revenue from the chromosomal microarray analysis (CMA) and clinical exome sequencing offered in the Baylor Miraca Genetics Laboratory (BMGL; <http://www.bmgl.com/BMGL/Default.aspx> [website](#)). The remaining authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Acknowledgments

We thank the patients and their families for their contribution to this study and R. Tadros and K.Y. van Spaendonck-Zwarts for helpful discussion. We thank the members of the Lausanne Genomic Technologies Facility for exome sequencing support. We dedicate this study to Dr. Leopoldo Zelante who headed for 40 years the Medical Genetics Unit, Casa Sollievo della Sofferenza, San Giovanni Rotondo and recently passed away. Leopoldo's devotion to the families who nurture affected children and passion for medical genetics was, is and will remain exemplar for all of us. We are grateful to the Genomic Disorder Biobank and Telethon Network of Genetic Biobanks (Telethon Italy grant GTB12001G) for banking of biospecimens. This work was supported by grants from the Swiss National Science Foundation (31003A_160203) to AR; the US National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI)/National Heart Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI) grant number HG006542 to the Baylor-Hopkins Center for Mendelian Genomics and the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS) NS058529 to JRL; Career Development Award K23NS078056 from NINDS to WW; the Italian Ministry of Health (Ricerca Corrente) to GM; the Dutch Heart Foundation (CVON 2012-10 Predict project and CVON 2014-18 CONCOR-

genes project) to CRB, AAMW and JB and JB and CRB, respectively. The Intramural Research Program of the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases also partly supported this research (WFS). The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

Web Resources

1000 Genomes Project Browser, <http://browser.1000genomes.org/index.html>

Burrows-Wheeler Aligner, <http://bio-bwa.sourceforge.net/>

dbSNP, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/SNP/>

Ensembl genome assembly GRCh37, http://grch37.ensembl.org/Homo_sapiens/Info/Index

Exome Aggregation Consortium (ExAC) Browser, <http://exac.broadinstitute.org/>

ExomeDepth, <https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/ExomeDepth/index.html>

GATK, <https://www.broadinstitute.org/gatk/>

GraphPad Prism, www.graphpad.com

NetGene2, <http://www.cbs.dtu.dk/services/NetGene2>

NHLBI GO Exome Sequencing Project (ESP) Exome Variant Server, <http://evs.gs.washington.edu/EVS/>

NNSPLICE, http://www.fruitfly.org/seq_tools/splice.html

OMIM, <http://www.omim.org/>

PolyPhen-2, <http://genetics.bwh.harvard.edu/pph2/>

SIFT, <http://sift.jcvi.org/>

Snpeff, <http://snpeff.sourceforge.net/>

SOAPSnp, <http://soap.genomics.org.cn/soapsnp.html>

Swiss-PdbViewer, <http://spdbv.vital-it.ch/>

UMD-Predictor, <http://umd-predictor.eu/>

Authors' contribution

GM, AR, CRB, JB conceived and directed the study. D.C, P.D.N., N.M., BM, C.F.M.d.S., FK, W.K.W., V.R.S., Z.H.C.A., J.R.L., M.K.E., V.N., R.J.F., M.N.A., recruited patients, gathered clinical information, prepared samples, performed whole-exome and mutational analysis. D.C, P.D.N., N.M., B.M., E.M.L., La.B., N.L, L.B performed the model organism experiments. NG

performed structural modeling of GNB5 variant. E.M.L. performed statistical analysis, E.M.L., E.A.N., A.A.M.W., and L.B. analyzed the data. C.D.K., F.T., TdB, W.d.G., M.K., J.B. designed and conducted the zebrafish experiments and analyzed the data. N.A.B. and I.R. contributed reagents/materials/analysis tools. W.F.S. provided unpublished *gnb5* KO mouse model data. P.D.N., A.R., G.M., C.R.B., J.B. wrote the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the manuscript.

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Figure Legends

Figure 1. Pedigrees from the six families investigated in this study

Affected members of families A to D (upper red-lined panel) and E to F (lower blue-lined panel) show severe and mild manifestation of the core symptoms of the novel HEIGHTS syndrome defined in this study. Filled symbols represent individuals with severe Sinus Sick Syndrome (SSS; top left quarter), intellectual disability (ID; top right quarter), hypotonia (bottom left quarter) and seizures (bottom right quarter), whereas light grey top left quarter indicate the presence of mild ID. Genotypes are specified according to NM_006578.3.

Figure 2. 3D model of the GNB5-RGS complex

(a) Three-dimensional representation of the human GNB5 (orange) complexed with RGS9 (red). A loop of RGS9 (blue) blocks the access to the

central pore of GNB5, in which a glycerol molecule (green) can be found in the x-ray structure ¹¹. The S81 residue is highlighted in cyan. **(b)** Top view of the GNB5 molecular surface. The S81 position (cyan) is emphasized with respect to the central pore. The glycerol molecule is shown in green (RGS9 and C111 have been removed for clarity). **(c, d)** Detailed views of the S81 aminoacidic context **(c)** and the energy minimized S81L variant **(d)**.

Figure 3. Cardiac function in *gnb5* mutant zebrafish

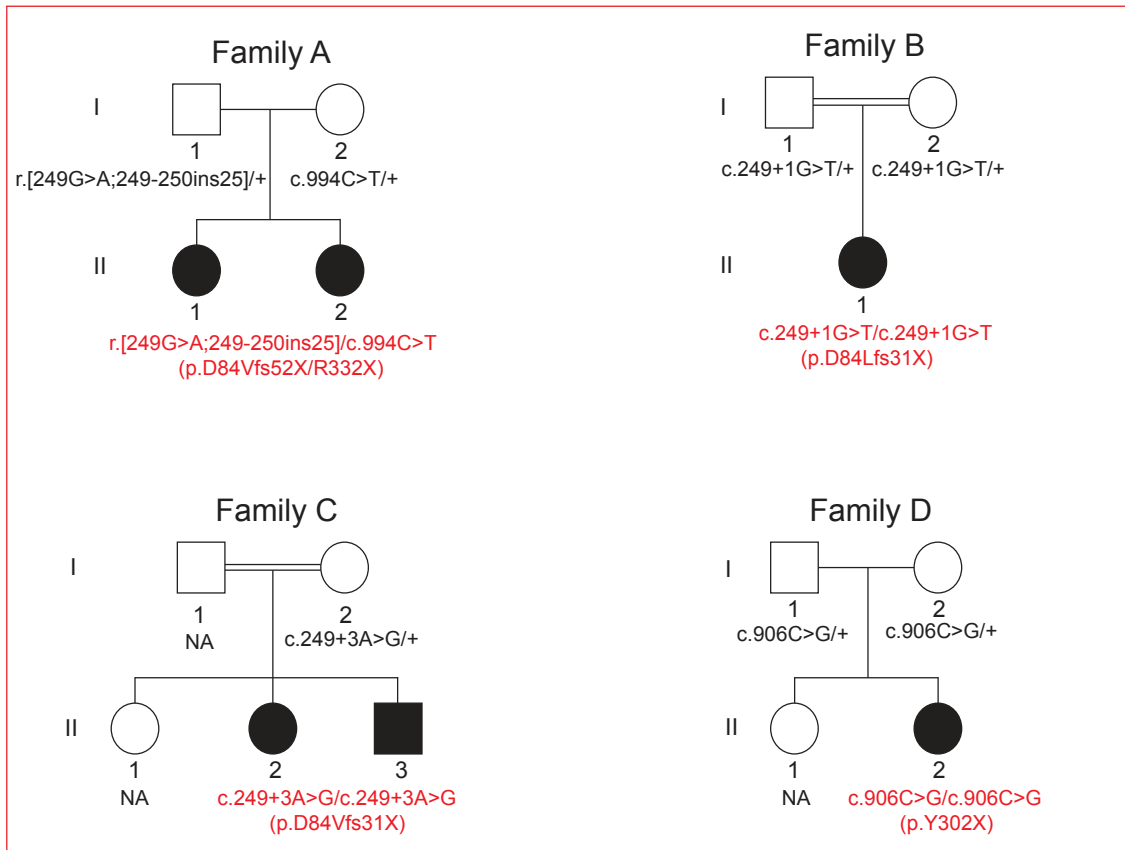
(a, d) Box-whisker plots demonstrate the heart rate response and the relative heart rate change of 5 dpf wild-type, sibling and *gnb5* mutant larvae to **(a,c)** 400 μ M of the parasympathetic agonist Carbachol (CCh) (wild-type N=10, sibling N=39, *gnb5* mutant N=14) and **(b, d)** 100 μ M of the sympathetic agonist isoproterenol (ISO) (wild-type N=12, sibling N=22, mutant N=9). The relative heart rate change is the % change between the basal heart rate measured and the heart rate after addition of CCh or ISO. WT, wild-type; SIB, sibling; MT, *gnb5* mutant; bpm, beats per minute.

Figure 4. Neurologic function in *gnb5* mutant zebrafish

(a, c) Touch-evoked escape response assay in which three consecutive tactile stimuli were applied. **(a)** Representative responses of 3 dpf wild-type and *gnb5* mutant embryos to a touch stimulus. Scalebar = 0.5cm. Box-whisker plots show quantification of the **(b)** swimming distance and **(c)** swimming speed in TL wild-types (N=19), siblings (N=46) and *gnb5* mutants (N=27). **(d, e)** Analysis of maximum tail movement at 5dpf. **(d)** Representative minimum projection images of tail movement in wild-type and *gnb5* mutant embryos, including tail angle analysis. The tail angle represents the angle between the head-tail midline axis in resting state and a line that was drawn from just caudal of the swimbladder to the tip of the tail at maximal tail movement **(e)** Tail angle quantification is displayed in box-whisker plots (wild-type N=10, *gnb5* mutants N=10).

Figure 1

Severe phenotype



Mild phenotype

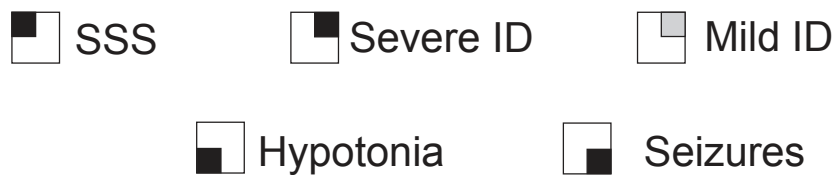
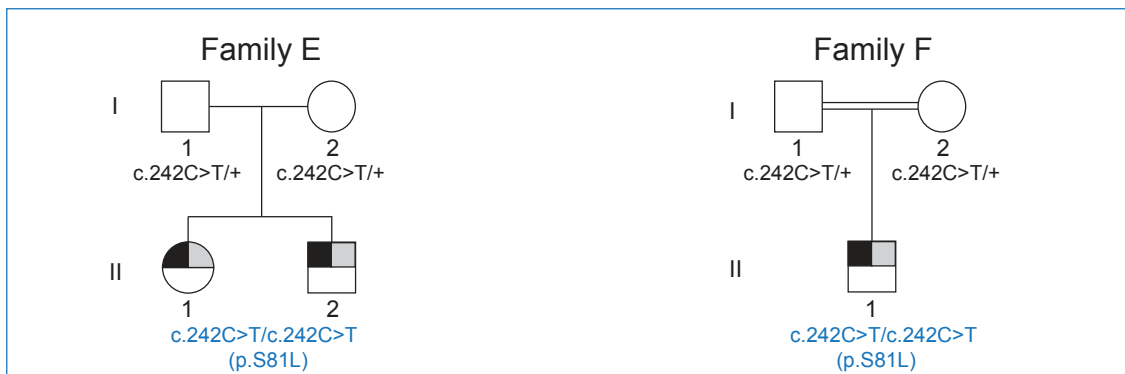


Figure 2

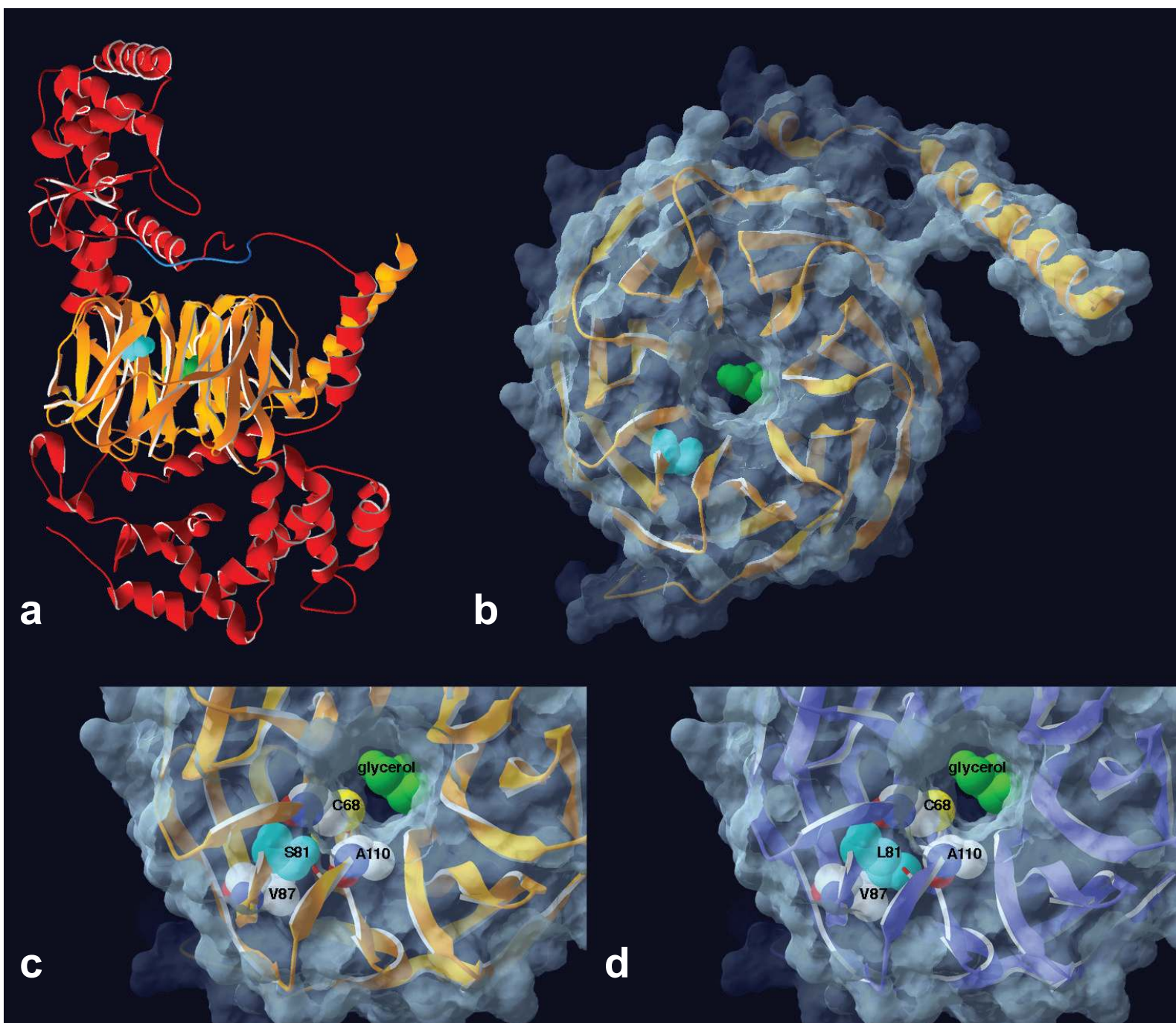


Figure 3

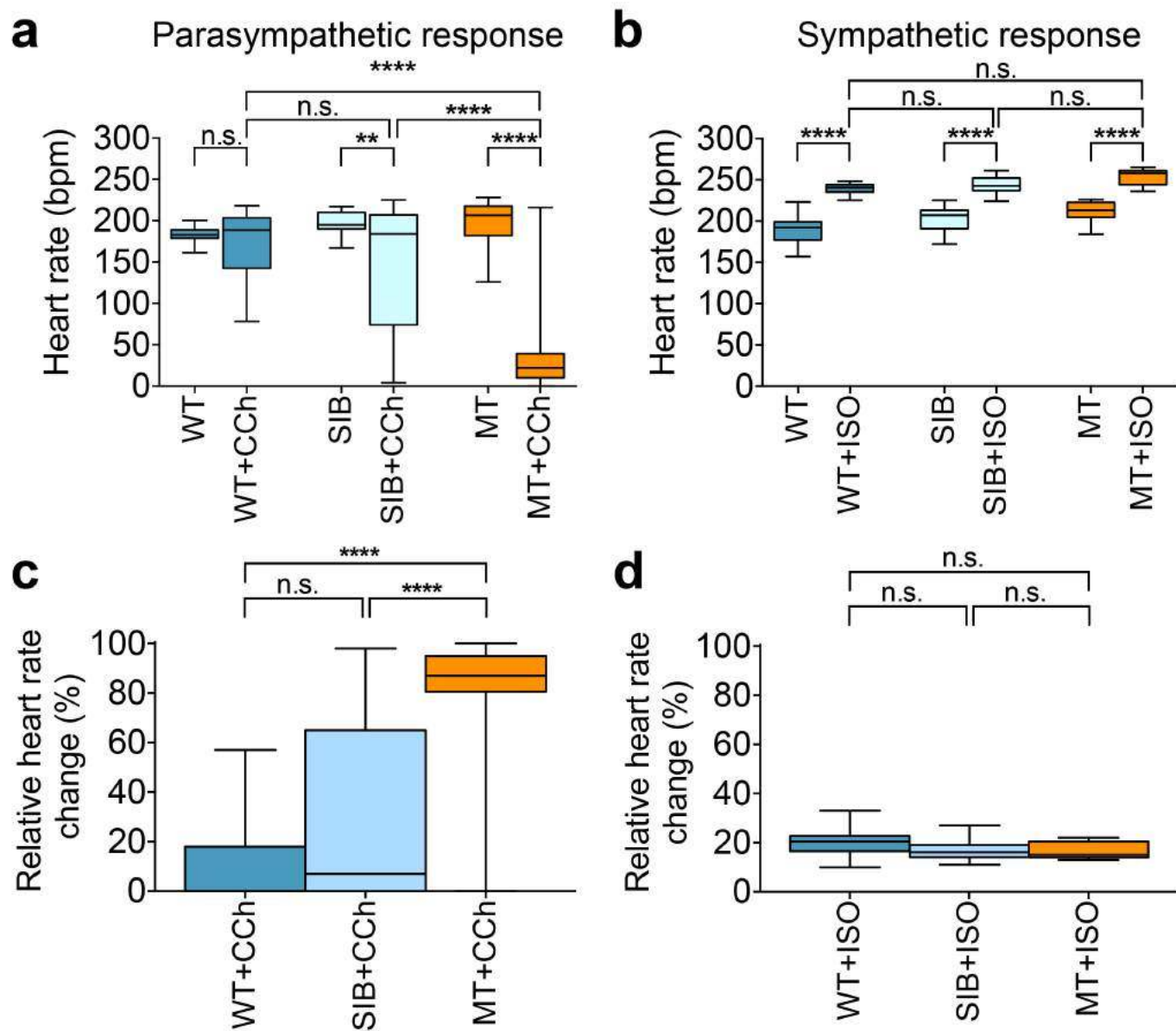


Figure 4

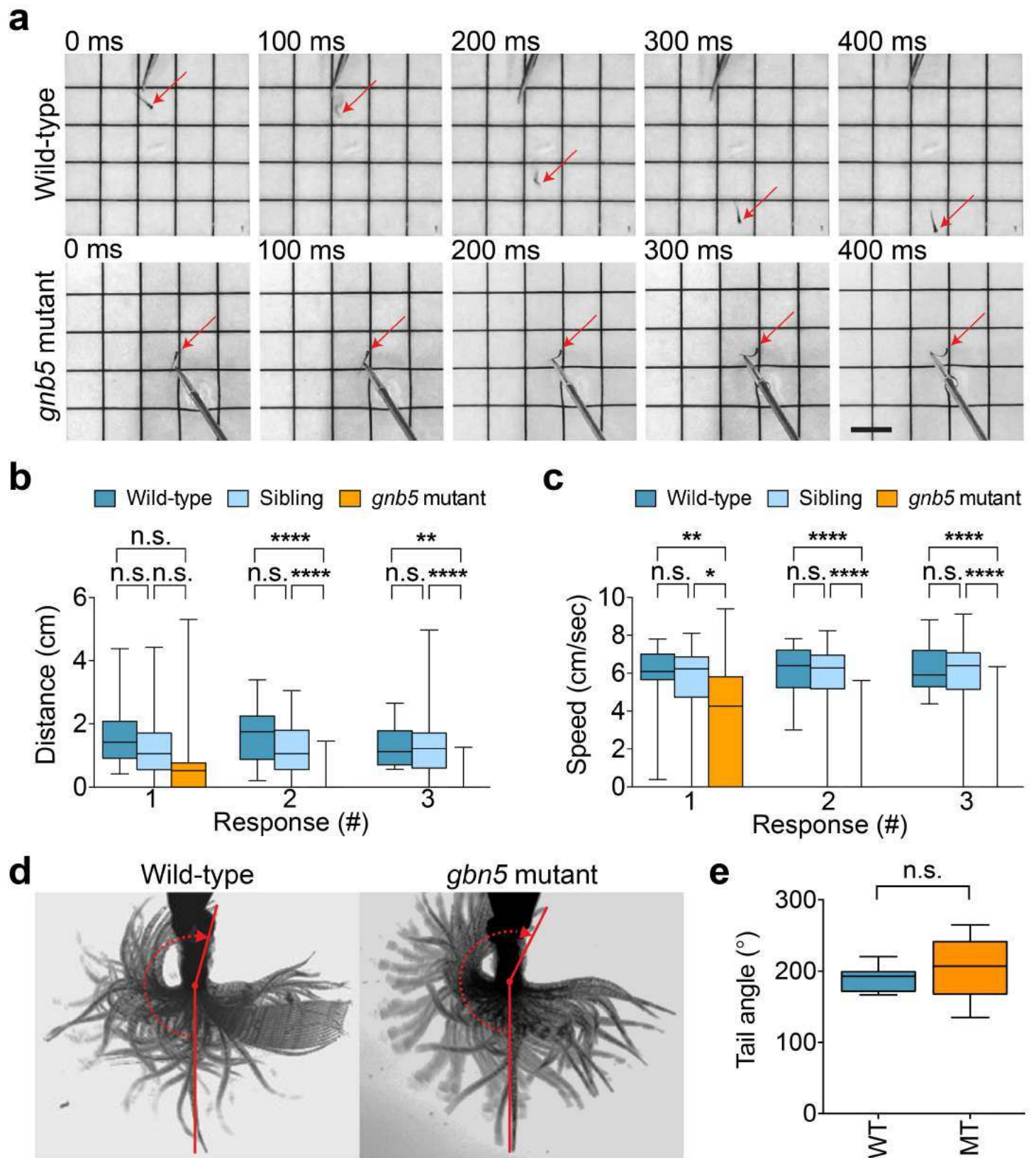


Table 1: Overlapping clinical features of individuals with GNB5-related syndrome

	Family A		Family B	Family C		Family D	Family E		Family F
	II.1	II.2	II.1	II.2	II.3	II.2	II.1	II.2	II.1
Gender, Age	F, 22	F, 20	F, 6	F, 11	M, 9	F, 12	F, 13	M, 8	M, 23
Birth weight	3580 g (50 th percentile)	NA	2980 g (15 th percentile)	2751 g (15 th percentile)	NA	2845 g (15 th percentile)	NA	NA	NA
Ethnicity	Italy	Italy	Jordan	Puerto Rico	Puerto Rico	India	Morocco	Morocco	Brazil
Consanguinity	-	-	+	+	+	-	-	-	+
Altered speech development	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	NA
- Verbal understanding			nonverbal	unremarkable	unremarkable				
- Lexical production			nonverbal	delayed	delayed	Nonverbal	delayed	delayed	
Intellectual disability (ID)	+	+	+	+	+	+	mild	mild	mild
Epilepsy	+	+	+	-	-	+	-	-	-
Sinus Sick Syndrome (SSS)	+	+	+	+	+	increased PR interval (intermittent Weckenbach)	+	+	+
- Minimum heart rate	24	39	NA	paced	paced	NA	20	16	
- Maximum heart rate	163	192	NA	paced (27% heartbeats on Holter)	paced (20% heartbeats on Holter)	NA	176	180	NA
- Chronotropic response	NA	NA	NA	+	+	NA	unremarkable	unremarkable	NA
- Escape beats	+	+	NA	paced	paced	NA	+	+	NA
- Pacemaker implantation	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	+	NA
- Heart structural abnormalities	-	PFO	NA	-	-	-	-	-	NA
Hypotonia	+	+	+	+	+	+	-	impaired fine motor skills	-
Pathological gastric reflux	+	+	-	+	+	+	-	-	NA
Nystagmus	+	+	+	+	+	+	NA	-	NA
Metabolic work-up									
- Plasma amino acids chromatography	938 µm/l (restored)	+	unremarkable	unremarkable	unremarkable	unremarkable	444 µm/l	unremarkable	NA
- Urine organic acids	unremarkable	unremarkable	increased excretion of 3-methyl-glutaconic acid	unremarkable	unremarkable	unremarkable	NA	NA	NA

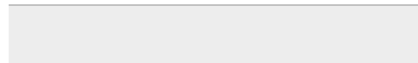
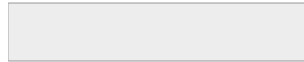
Patient numbers refer to those of the pedigree in **Figure 1**.

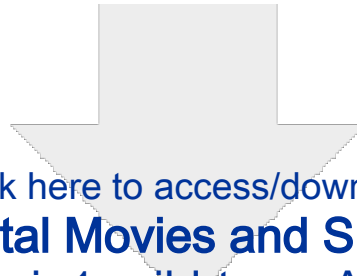
Abbreviations are as follows: M, male; F, female; NA, Not Available; +, present clinical trait; -, not present clinical trait; PFO, Patent Foramen Ovale; RV dilatation, Right Ventricular dilatation. Complete pedigree charts, consanguinity status, variants, and related homozygous and/or compound heterozygous alleles are reported in **Figure 1** and **Table S2**.



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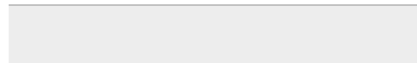
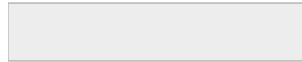
Supplemental Text and Figures
AJHG_GNB5_Supplemental data.pdf

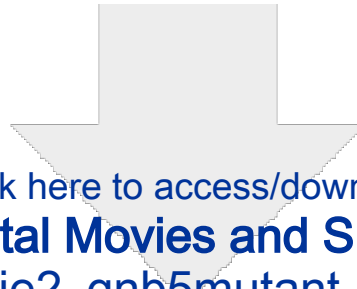




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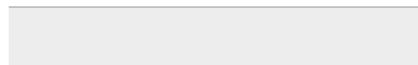
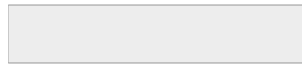
Supplemental Movies and Spreadsheets
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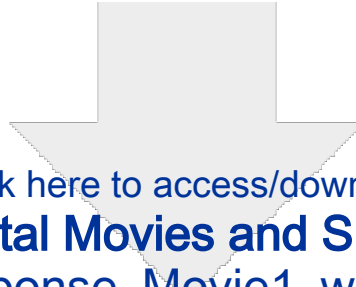




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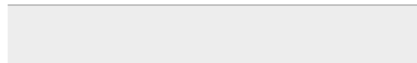
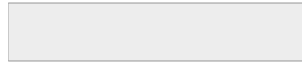




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Supplemental Movies and Spreadsheets

TouchEvokedResponse_Movie1_wild-type_AJHG.mov





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TouchEvokedResponse_Movie2_gnb5mutant_AJHG.mo

