

PGC1 α and mitochondrial metabolism – emerging concepts and relevance in ageing and neurodegenerative disorders

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Summary

PGC1 α is a transcriptional coactivator that is a central inducer of mitochondrial biogenesis in cells. Recent work highlighted that PGC1 α can also modulate the composition and functions of individual mitochondria. Therefore, it is emerging that PGC1 α is controlling global oxidative metabolism by performing two types of remodelling: (1) cellular remodelling through mitochondrial biogenesis, and (2) organelle remodelling through alteration in the intrinsic properties of mitochondria. The elevated oxidative metabolism associated with increased PGC1 α activity could be accompanied by an increase in reactive oxygen species (ROS) that are primarily generated by mitochondria. However, increasing evidence suggests that this is not the case, as PGC1 α is also a powerful regulator of ROS removal by increasing the expression of numerous ROS-detoxifying enzymes. Therefore, PGC1 α , by controlling both the induction of mitochondrial metabolism and the removal of its ROS by-products, would elevate oxidative metabolism and minimize the impact of ROS on cell physiology. In this Commentary, we discuss how the biogenesis and remodelling of mitochondria that are elicited by PGC1 α contribute to an increase in oxidative metabolism and the preservation of ROS homeostasis. Finally, we examine the importance of these findings in ageing and neurodegenerative disorders, conditions that are associated with impaired mitochondrial functions and ROS balance.

Key words: PGC1 α , Mitochondrial remodelling, Mitochondrial biogenesis, Reactive oxygen species (ROS), Ageing, Neurodegeneration

Introduction

The regulation of cellular and mitochondrial metabolism is controlled by numerous transcriptional networks. In recent years, the peroxisome proliferator-activated receptor γ coactivator 1 (PGC1) family of transcriptional coactivators has emerged as central regulators of metabolism. The PGC1 family consists of three members, namely PGC1 α , PGC1 β and the PGC related coactivator (PRC), which interact with transcription factors and nuclear receptors to exert their biological functions (Handschin and Spiegelman, 2006). The most well-known and studied member of the PGC1 family is PGC1 α (encoded by the *PPARGC1A* gene). PGC1 α is a positive regulator of mitochondrial biogenesis and respiration, adaptive thermogenesis, gluconeogenesis as well as many other metabolic processes (Handschin and Spiegelman, 2006). Importantly, the expression of PGC1 α is highly inducible by physiological cues, including exercise, cold and fasting (Handschin and Spiegelman, 2006). A central function of PGC1 α that is intimately linked to mitochondrial biogenesis is the detoxification of reactive oxygen species (ROS) (St-Pierre et al., 2006; St-Pierre et al., 2003; Valle et al., 2005). Indeed, ROS are generated during mitochondrial respiration, and PGC1 α has emerged as a key player, controlling their removal by regulating the expression of numerous ROS-detoxifying enzymes. Therefore, it appears that PGC1 α both increases mitochondrial functions and minimizes the buildup of its by-products, ensuring a global positive impact on oxidative metabolism.

The other two members of the family, PGC1 β and PRC, were discovered on the basis of similarity in sequence identity. PGC1 β

possesses a large degree of sequence identity and homology to PGC1 α (Kressler et al., 2002; Lin et al., 2002a), whereas PRC has less homology to PGC1 α and shares only some structural features (Andersson and Scarpulla, 2001). Functionally, PGC1 β is a powerful inducer of mitochondrial biogenesis and respiration (Lin et al., 2002a; St-Pierre et al., 2003). It is also involved in the expression of the lipogenic programme in liver (Lin et al., 2005) and of type IIX fibres in muscle (Arany et al., 2007), as well as playing a central role in interferon- γ -induced host defence (Sonoda et al., 2007) and osteoclast activation (Ishii et al., 2009). PRC has been implicated in the regulation of the expression of several components of the respiratory chain (Vercauteren et al., 2009). Taken together, the PGC1 family of proteins regulate a wide array of metabolic functions, enabling them to act as global orchestrators of metabolism. However, one common metabolic function for the three members of the PGC1 family is mitochondrial metabolism. More advances have been made in elucidating the impact of PGC1 α on mitochondrial metabolism compared with the other two members of the family, and for this reason, this Commentary will focus on PGC1 α . We will highlight recent developments indicating that PGC1 α has a profound impact on the intrinsic properties and functions of individual mitochondria, in addition to stimulating mitochondrial biogenesis. This mitochondrial remodelling might have important physiological consequences because it could be an effective way to fine-tune mitochondrial metabolism. We will focus our analysis on the effect of PGC1 α on mitochondrial respiration

and ROS metabolism, two physiological processes that are tightly interconnected. Finally, we will discuss the potential beneficial effects of elevating PGC1 α activity in neurodegenerative disorders and ageing, pathological conditions that have a strong association with mitochondrial dysfunctions.

PGC1 α and the regulation of oxidative metabolism

There are two ways by which PGC1 α can increase global oxidative metabolism. First, it can perform cellular remodelling through organelle biogenesis (mitochondria and peroxisomes). Second, an increasing number of studies highlight that PGC1 α can coordinate organelle remodelling, resulting in substantial modification of the composition and function of individual organelles.

Cellular remodelling

Organelle biogenesis

The original discovery of PGC1 α in brown fat cells revealed an important function for this transcriptional coactivator in mitochondrial metabolism (Box 1). Indeed, ectopic expression of PGC1 α in white adipose cells results in a drastic increase in mitochondrial biogenesis, as well as induction of the expression of the mitochondrial uncoupling protein 1 (UCP1), two characteristics that are reminiscent of brown adipocytes (Puigserver et al., 1998). Immediately following this discovery, it was shown that PGC1 α increases the expression of the nuclear respiratory factors (NRFs), which are transcription factors that regulate the expression of numerous mitochondrial genes (Wu et al., 1999). In addition, PGC1 α coactivates and increases the transcriptional activity of NRF1 on target genes (Wu et al., 1999). It was later revealed that the main physiological consequence on mitochondria for this PGC1 α -mediated increase in mitochondrial gene expression is a substantial induction of uncoupled respiration (St-Pierre et al., 2003). Together, these studies identified PGC1 α as a master inducer of mitochondrial biogenesis and respiration.

Mouse models further highlighted the importance of PGC1 α in mitochondrial physiology. Tissues from *Ppargc1a*-null mice display reduced expression of mitochondrial genes, notably those encoding various subunits of the electron transport chain, and lowered respiration (Leone et al., 2005; Lin et al., 2004). This

reduced mitochondrial function impairs physiological processes that rely on mitochondrial metabolism. Indeed, *Ppargc1a*-null mice exhibit sensitivity to cold that is associated with an impaired capacity to upregulate the expression of UCP1 upon exposure to cold (Leone et al., 2005; Lin et al., 2004). They also show decreased capacity to exercise compared with wild-type controls (Leone et al., 2005). Contrary to *Ppargc1a*-null mice, transgenic mice ectopically expressing PGC1 α in the heart and muscle tissues display increased expression of mitochondrial genes as well as elevated mitochondrial biogenesis (Lehman et al., 2000; Lin et al., 2002b; Wende et al., 2007). These studies demonstrate that gain and loss of PGC1 α have important consequences for mitochondrial physiology *in vivo*.

A central organelle that supports mitochondrial functions during oxidative metabolism is the peroxisome. The main function of the peroxisome in mammalian cells is to metabolize complex fatty acids that cannot be metabolized by mitochondria. Importantly, peroxisomes cannot degrade fatty acids to completion, and export fatty acids with shortened chains to the mitochondria for the final breakdown reactions. Therefore, mitochondria and peroxisomes cooperate in the metabolism of lipids, which are very important fuels during oxidative metabolism (Schrader and Yoon, 2007). The connection between mitochondria and peroxisomes has been further strengthened in recent years by the discovery of vesicles that travel between the two organelles (Andrade-Navarro et al., 2009). Furthermore, a recent study demonstrated that PGC1 α is a positive regulator of peroxisomal biogenesis (Bagattin et al., 2010), illustrating that mitochondria and peroxisomes share a common factor for their biogenesis.

Together, these data demonstrate that one central way by which PGC1 α orchestrates changes in cellular metabolism is through organelle biogenesis (Fig. 1). Given that mitochondria are the main producers of ROS in cells, with peroxisomes also contributing, cells that display an induction of PGC1 α in response to various physiological stimuli must adapt to an elevated generation of ROS mediated by the increased number of mitochondria and peroxisomes, or else suffer the deleterious consequences of increased oxidative metabolism. Next, we examine the effect of PGC1 α on ROS metabolism.

ROS metabolism

Cells generate various forms of ROS, including superoxide and hydrogen peroxide, which if not properly removed, can attack DNA, lipids and proteins. To protect themselves from the potential deleterious effects of ROS, cells contain ROS-detoxifying enzymes in various compartments, notably mitochondria, peroxisomes and the cytoplasm. PGC1 α has been shown to positively affect the expression of numerous ROS-detoxifying enzymes (St-Pierre et al., 2006; St-Pierre et al., 2003; Valle et al., 2005). The initial investigation supporting a role for PGC1 α in ROS metabolism reported that ectopic expression of PGC1 α in muscle cells increases the expression of superoxide dismutase 2 (SOD2), which removes superoxide, and glutathione peroxidase 1 (GPX1), which removes hydrogen peroxide (St-Pierre et al., 2003). Further studies extended the repertoire of ROS-detoxifying enzymes, whose expression is regulated by PGC1 α , to include various mitochondrial, cytoplasmic as well as peroxisomal ROS-detoxifying enzymes (St-Pierre et al., 2006; Valle et al., 2005). These studies also revealed the physiological relevance of the ROS metabolic programme that is regulated by PGC1 α . Ectopic

Box 1. Fat cell metabolism

White adipocytes are cells that contain a large fat droplet and few mitochondria. These cells are responsible for storing energy.

Brown adipocytes are cells that contain multiple small lipid droplets and numerous mitochondria. The main function of these cells is to generate heat mainly through uncoupling of mitochondrial respiration by the mitochondrial protein uncoupling protein 1 (UCP1). Uncoupled respiration refers to respiration that is not coupled to ATP production, thereby generating heat through the dissipation of the mitochondrial proton gradient. There is basal uncoupling as well as inducible uncoupling, notably through the UCPs (Jastroch et al., 2010). Coupled respiration refers to respiration that is coupled to ATP production. For mammals under standard conditions (i.e. awake but resting, not digesting food, at thermoneutrality and stress free), ~80% of mitochondrial respiration is coupled and 20% is uncoupled (Rolfe and Brown, 1997).

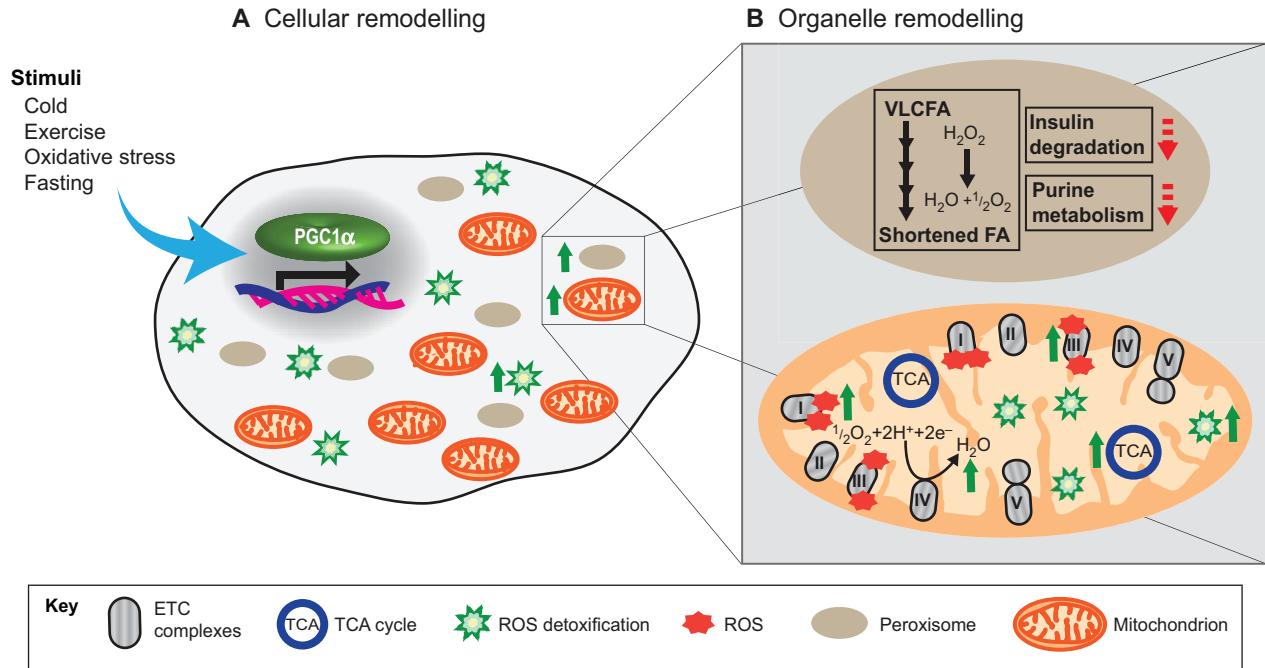


Fig. 1. Regulation of oxidative metabolism by PGC1 α . Physiological stimuli induce expression of PGC1 α leading to increased oxidative metabolism through cellular and organelle remodelling. (A) The impact of PGC1 α on cellular remodelling: elevated PGC1 α levels increase mitochondrial and peroxisomal biogenesis as well as ROS-detoxifying enzymes (illustrated by green arrows). (B) The impact of PGC1 α on remodelling of peroxisomes and mitochondria. Elevated levels of PGC1 α change the composition of peroxisomes, so that they might exhibit decreased insulin degradation and purine metabolism (dashed lines represent the proposed functional changes). Elevated levels of PGC1 α alter the composition and functions of individual mitochondria. High levels of PGC1 α result in elevated activity of TCA cycle enzymes, changes in the subunit composition of the various ETC complexes, increased content of ROS-detoxifying enzymes as well as elevated respiratory and ROS production capacities. The increases are illustrated by green arrows. VLCFA, very long chain fatty acid; FA, fatty acid.

expression of PGC1 α in cells improves survival during conditions of oxidative stress (St-Pierre et al., 2006; Valle et al., 2005), whereas reduced expression of PGC1 α sensitises cells to oxidative stress (St-Pierre et al., 2006). In support of these experiments, transgenic mice ectopically expressing PGC1 α in muscle have a lower accumulation of oxidative damage with age compared with wild-type controls (Wenz et al., 2009), whereas the hippocampus and substantia nigra of *Ppargc1a*-null mice display enhanced sensitivity to oxidative stressors (St-Pierre et al., 2006).

Overall, the studies on the effect of PGC1 α on oxidative metabolism reveal that it increases mitochondrial biogenesis in parallel to elevating the cellular ROS-detoxifying capacity, such that cells can benefit from increased respiration and ATP production without suffering from oxidative damage. For these reasons, PGC1 α has been suggested to coordinate a 'clean energy programme' (Finkel, 2006), in which the generation of mitochondrial high energy metabolites (ATP) and removal of toxic derivatives (ROS) are coordinately regulated.

Organelle remodelling

As mentioned above, PGC1 α positively regulates the expression of diverse mitochondrial, peroxisomal and ROS-detoxifying gene networks. The elevated expression of these genes in cells that ectopically express PGC1 α has been mostly attributed to increased organelle biogenesis. Indeed, it is expected that if an enzyme is located in mitochondria and there is a proliferation of mitochondria, the cellular content of this enzyme will increase. However, there is growing evidence that PGC1 α also modulates the intrinsic composition of mitochondria and peroxisomes. In

other words, the new mitochondria and peroxisomes that are generated in the presence of PGC1 α have different properties compared with the original organelles. These changes in the intrinsic properties of mitochondria and peroxisomes will have a central impact on cellular gene expression profiles and oxidative metabolism, as discussed below.

Mitochondrial respiratory capacity

The first study that investigated the impact of PGC1 α on the respiratory capacity of individual mitochondria revealed that mitochondria isolated from muscle tissues of transgenic mice that ectopically express PGC1 α (MCK-PGC1 α Tg mice) have a higher capacity for substrate oxidation than those from wild-type controls (St-Pierre et al., 2003). Two recent studies performed comprehensive bioenergetics analyses of mitochondria isolated from muscle tissues of MCK-PGC1 α Tg mice (Austin et al., 2011; Hoeks et al., 2012). Austin and collaborators (Austin et al., 2011) reported increased resting (state 4) and active (state 3) respiration on carbohydrates (malate and pyruvate) for muscle mitochondria from MCK-PGC1 α Tg mice compared with those from wild-type controls (Box 2). Hoeks and collaborators (Hoeks et al., 2012) reported an intriguing substrate preference in that muscle mitochondria from MCK-PGC1 α Tg mice display increased active respiration when they respire on lipid (palmitoyl CoA plus carnitine), but not on carbohydrate (in this case pyruvate). In addition, they observed no difference in resting respiration between muscle mitochondria from MCK-PGC1 α Tg mice and wild-type controls when respiring on lipid or carbohydrate (Hoeks et al., 2012). This substrate preference has

Box 2. Respiration states in isolated mitochondria

In order to experimentally determine the respiratory capacity of mitochondria, they are incubated in the presence of various substrates and/or drugs. Common substrates include pyruvate (carbohydrate) and palmitoyl carnitine (lipid). Malate is often added to ensure that the citric acid cycle intermediates are not limiting. The obtained respiration measurements are normalised per milligram of mitochondrial protein. The most commonly assessed respiration states are state 3 and state 4 (Brand and Nicholls, 2011).

State 3: respiration rate in the presence of substrates and ADP. Mitochondria convert ADP into ATP by the ATP synthase. State 3 respiration represents the active state of mitochondria.

State 4: respiration rate after ADP has been converted into ATP. Often, the drug oligomycin is added to inhibit ATP synthase, so that the respiration is not linked to production of ATP. This respiration rate represents the basal state of mitochondria.

also been reported in mitochondria isolated from muscle tissues of mice containing an inducible PGC1 α transgene (Wende et al., 2007). These mitochondria display increased resting and active respiration rates when respiring on palmitoyl carnitine, but not pyruvate (Wende et al., 2007). The absence of an elevated respiration in mitochondria isolated from muscle tissues that ectopically express PGC1 α when they respire on pyruvate alone (Hoeks et al., 2012; Wende et al., 2007) could be owing to the fact that malate was not added in parallel to pyruvate, which could limit citric acid cycle intermediates (Box 2). Nevertheless, taken together, these studies illustrate that mitochondria isolated from muscle tissues that ectopically express PGC1 α can display increased respiratory capacity. By contrast, mitochondria isolated from muscle tissues lacking PGC1 α have diminished state 3 respiration rates when respiring on pyruvate or palmitoyl carnitine (Zechner et al., 2010).

The PGC1 α -mediated changes in the respiratory capacity of mitochondria could be explained by alterations in either the levels or activity of various mitochondrial enzymes, or a combination of both. In support of this point, muscle mitochondria isolated from MCK-PGC1 α Tg mice have elevated activity of citrate synthase, a citric acid cycle enzyme, and β -hydroxyacyl CoA dehydrogenase, a fatty acid oxidation enzyme (Hoeks et al., 2012). Furthermore, they have elevated amounts of several subunits of the various electron transport chain (ETC) complexes as well as ATP synthase (Austin et al., 2011; Wenz et al., 2009). These studies nicely demonstrate that PGC1 α affects the content and activity of numerous proteins within mitochondria that are involved in diverse pathways, supporting the idea that PGC1 α has a global effect on mitochondrial functions.

Finally, it emerges that PGC1 α can control cellular mitochondrial respiration in two ways, first by changing the number of mitochondria in cells, and second by altering the respiratory capacity of individual mitochondria.

Mitochondrial ROS generation capacity

The respiratory and ROS-generating capacities of mitochondria are inextricably linked to the activity of the ETC. The main sites of ROS production by the electron transport chain are complexes I and III of the ETC. The topology of ROS for these complexes is

such that complex I generates ROS on the matrix side of the membrane whereas complex III generates ROS on both the matrix and cytoplasmic sides of the membrane (see Box 3) (Brand, 2010). Only recently, functional studies were performed to quantitate the impact of PGC1 α on the capacity of mitochondria to generate ROS (Austin et al., 2011; Hoeks et al.,

Box 3. Assays to measure ROS production in isolated mitochondria

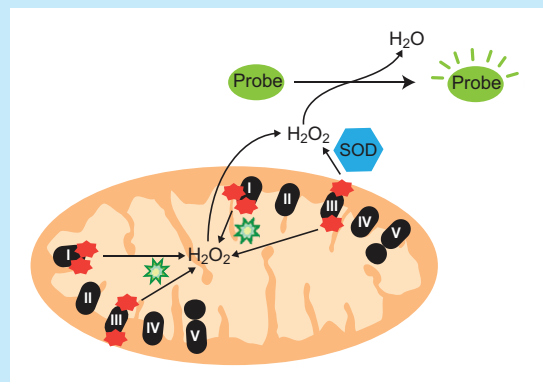
During mitochondrial respiration, electrons can escape the mitochondrial electron transport chain and react with oxygen to form superoxide anions.

Fluorometric methods

These methods indirectly measure superoxide production. The basis of this technique is the reaction of hydrogen peroxide (H₂O₂) with horseradish peroxidase and a substrate (e.g. Amplex red) that becomes fluorescent. Isolated mitochondria are incubated in the presence of substrates to activate respiration. Superoxide that is generated in the mitochondrial matrix cannot cross the mitochondrial membrane and is converted by SOD2 into H₂O₂, which then diffuses out of the mitochondria into the assay medium and is detected by the assay (see figure). Superoxide generated on the cytoplasmic face of the mitochondrial membrane can be quantified by adding exogenous SOD in the assay medium, which converts it into H₂O₂. Importantly, this method permits the quantification of ROS that originate from both the matrix and cytoplasmic face of the mitochondrial membrane. Furthermore, this assay is used to determine the topology of superoxide production by mitochondria, that is, determining the side of the mitochondrial membrane on which superoxide is generated. If the rate of H₂O₂ production increases during the assay upon addition of exogenous SOD, it means that superoxide is released on the cytoplasmic face of the membrane. If the rate of H₂O₂ production is insensitive to exogenous SOD, it means that superoxide is coming from the matrix.

Electron spin resonance

This method directly measures molecules with unpaired electrons, such as the superoxide anion, by using spin traps. Isolated mitochondria are incubated in the presence of substrates to activate respiration. Superoxide generated on the cytoplasmic face of the mitochondrial membrane can be directly detected and quantified. Superoxide that is generated in the mitochondrial matrix cannot cross the mitochondrial membrane, and hence, is not readily detected. However, new spin traps that accumulate inside mitochondria have been developed and might prove useful in assessing ROS generated in the mitochondrial matrix (Spasojević, 2011).



2012). Mitochondria isolated from muscle tissues of MCK–PGC1 α Tg mice display an increased capacity to generate ROS at complexes I and III of the ETC, in agreement with their increased respiratory capacity (Austin et al., 2011). Importantly, the fraction of electrons that escape the ETC to generate ROS per unit of respiration is unaltered by PGC1 α , indicating a tight association between respiration and production of ROS at the mitochondrial level. Also, PGC1 α does not affect the topology of ROS production by complexes I and III (Austin et al., 2011; Brand, 2010). The second study on the impact of PGC1 α on mitochondrial production of ROS using the same PGC1 α transgenic mouse model found that PGC1 α does not impact the capacity of mitochondria to generate ROS (Hoeks et al., 2012). However, that study provides only a partial assessment of the mitochondrial ROS production sites because the authors used electron spin resonance (ESR) with a specific spin trap that can only detect ROS generated on the cytoplasmic face of the mitochondrial membrane (see Box 3). The study by Austin and colleagues (Austin et al., 2011) used fluorescent probes that permit the quantification of ROS production from both the matrix and the cytoplasmic face of the mitochondrial membrane, thereby providing a greater coverage of the ROS-production sites (see Box 3). These differences in experimental approaches to detect and quantify mitochondrial ROS production are likely to be the main reason for the variation in the reported results.

The elevated capacity of mitochondria isolated from muscle tissues of MCK–PGC1 α Tg mice to generate ROS could be explained by a higher content of subunits from complexes I and III (Austin et al., 2011; Wenz et al., 2009). Another key factor that could contribute to the greater release of ROS from these mitochondria is their elevated content of SOD2 (Wenz et al., 2009). Indeed, the most common assay used to measure production of ROS by mitochondria is to quantify the amount of H₂O₂ they release (Box 3). This method was used in our study (Austin et al., 2011), in which muscle mitochondria from MCK–PGC1 α Tg mice showed an increased capacity to produce ROS. The elevated content of SOD2 in muscle mitochondria from MCK–PGC1 α Tg mice will increase the dismutation rate of superoxide into H₂O₂ inside the mitochondrial matrix, causing the release of elevated levels of H₂O₂ into the medium. Importantly, however, in a cellular context, this elevated release of H₂O₂ by mitochondria will be removed by various cytoplasmic ROS-detoxifying enzymes, whose expression is upregulated by PGC1 α (St-Pierre et al., 2006). In fact, it appears that the increase in ROS detoxification mediated by PGC1 α is greater than the increase in mitochondrial production of ROS mediated by PGC1 α , indicating that PGC1 α could be associated with reduced steady-state levels of ROS in cells. In support of this hypothesis, cells that ectopically express PGC1 α display reduced levels of ROS, whereas PGC1 α null cells show increased ROS content (St-Pierre et al., 2006; Valle et al., 2005). Furthermore, muscle tissues from PGC1 α transgenic mice display reduced accumulation of oxidative damage with age compared with wild-type controls, illustrating that globally PGC1 α protects against oxidative damage (Wenz et al., 2009).

Collectively, the studies exploring the impact of PGC1 α on the respiration and ROS-production capacities of mitochondria highlight that PGC1 α causes substantial remodelling of mitochondrial composition and functions. This remodelling of mitochondria will work in concert with PGC1 α -mediated biogenesis of mitochondria, as well as with the increase in

content of ROS-detoxifying enzymes, to establish a new state of cellular oxidative metabolism (Fig. 1).

Possible effect of PGC1 α on the composition of peroxisomes

The only evidence of peroxisomal remodelling by PGC1 α is on the basis of gene expression data (Bagattin et al., 2010). Ectopic expression of PGC1 α in various cell lines increases the expression of some peroxisomal enzymes, such as those involved in fatty acid oxidation, whereas the expression of other enzymes is unaffected, for example the insulin-degrading enzyme involved in insulin degradation, or even reduced, such as the xanthine dehydrogenase involved in purine metabolism (Bagattin et al., 2010). Given that PGC1 α regulates peroxisomal biogenesis (Fig. 1) (Bagattin et al., 2010), these data suggest that the new peroxisomes generated in the presence of PGC1 α differ in their intrinsic composition, so that they would be specialised in specific metabolic functions, notably fatty acid oxidation (Fig. 1). However, no functional study has been performed on peroxisomes isolated from tissues or cells that ectopically express PGC1 α to determine the impact of these changes in gene expression on peroxisomal metabolism. Furthermore, it remains to be elucidated how the peroxisomal remodelling that is elicited by PGC1 α works in concert with mitochondrial remodelling as well as with organelle biogenesis to regulate global cellular energy metabolism.

Mechanisms of cellular and organelle remodelling

Mitochondria consist of proteins that are encoded both by nuclear and mitochondrial genes. The mammalian mitochondrial genome encodes ETC subunits, ribosomal RNAs (rRNAs) and several transfer RNAs (tRNAs), all of which are localised to the mitochondria (Scarpulla, 2008). The mitochondrial proteins that are encoded by nuclear genes are imported into the mitochondria, and the regulation of global mitochondrial metabolism implicates a coordinated control of the expression of proteins encoded by the mitochondrial and nuclear genomes. Nuclear respiratory factor 1 (NRF1), nuclear respiratory factor 2 [(NRF2), also known as GA-binding protein (GABPA)], and the oestrogen related receptors (ERRs) are important transcription factors that regulate the expression of mitochondrial genes encoded in the nucleus (Giguère, 2008; Handschin and Spiegelman, 2006). PGC1 α has been shown to increase the expression and/or coactivate these transcription factors to regulate the expression of genes involved in mitochondrial metabolism (Giguère, 2008; Handschin and Spiegelman, 2006). Notably, PGC1 α increases the expression and acts as a coactivator for NRF1 to regulate the expression of transcription factor A, mitochondrial (TFAM), which is primarily responsible for the transcription and replication of mitochondrial genes from the mitochondrial genome (Wu et al., 1999).

Recently, evidence has emerged that PGC1 α itself might also be localised to mitochondria where it would interact with TFAM (Aquilano et al., 2010; Safdar et al., 2011). The exact function of PGC1 α inside mitochondria remains to be fully elucidated. Nevertheless, it is tempting to speculate that PGC1 α is a proximal factor coordinating the expression of mitochondrial genes that are encoded by both nuclear and mitochondrial genomes. This way, PGC1 α could provide a unified control over mitochondrial metabolism.

Finally, it is important to appreciate that although PGC1 α can regulate various mitochondrial functions and other metabolic programmes, they do not necessarily need simultaneous

Table 1. Post-translational modifications of PGC1 α and their biological consequences

Post-translational modifications	Biological outcome	References
Phosphorylation		
AKT	Inhibition of activity affecting the expression of gluconeogenic and lipid oxidation genes	(Li et al., 2007)
AMPK	Increase in activity and regulation of genes involved in mitochondrial functions and glucose metabolism	(Jäger et al., 2007)
CLK2	Decrease in expression of gluconeogenic genes	(Rodgers et al., 2010)
GSK3B	In combination with phosphorylation of p38 MAPK, GSK3B designates PGC1 α for proteasomal degradation	(Olson et al., 2008)
p38 MAPK	Increase in activity leading to expression of mitochondrial genes	(Puigserver et al., 2001)
S6 kinase	Decrease in the induction of gluconeogenic genes while maintaining the expression of mitochondrial genes	(Lustig et al., 2011)
Acetylation		
GCN5	Inhibition of transcriptional activity	(Lerin et al., 2006)
Deacetylation		
SIRT1	Increase in expression of gluconeogenic genes	(Rodgers et al., 2005)
SUMOylation		
SUMO1	Decrease in transcriptional activity	(Rytinki and Palvimo, 2009)
Methylation		
PRMT1	Increase in activity leading to expression of mitochondrial biogenesis genes	(Teyssier et al., 2005)

regulation under a given physiological condition. In this context, post-translational modifications might impart specificity to the metabolic functions that are mediated by PGC1 α . Indeed, the activity of PGC1 α is controlled by several post-translational modifications (Table 1), including phosphorylation (Jäger et al., 2007; Li et al., 2007; Lustig et al., 2011; Olson et al., 2008; Puigserver et al., 2001; Rodgers et al., 2010), acetylation (Lerin et al., 2006), deacetylation (Rodgers et al., 2005), small ubiquitin-like modifier (SUMO)-ylation (Rytinki and Palvimo, 2009) as well as methylation (Teyssier et al., 2005). Deacetylation and methylation of PGC1 α increase its activity, whereas acetylation and sumoylation negatively impact its function. Phosphorylation of PGC1 α can increase or decrease its activity depending on the phosphorylating kinase. Importantly, these post-translational modifications could confer specificity to PGC1 α for specific target genes. In support of this hypothesis, cytokine-mediated phosphorylation of PGC1 α by p38 mitogen-activated protein kinase (p38 MAPK) robustly increases the expression of uncoupling protein 3 (UCP3) (Puigserver et al., 2001). Also, a recent study has shown that phosphorylation of PGC1 α by S6 kinase decreases its capacity to induce the expression of gluconeogenic genes in the liver, while preserving its ability to regulate the expression of mitochondrial genes (Lustig et al., 2011). Collectively, these studies elegantly demonstrate that these post-translational modifications can be important modulators of PGC1 α activity.

The functions of PGC1 α in pathological conditions

Given the central importance of mitochondria in energy homeostasis, it is perhaps not surprising that PGC1 α has been implicated in many pathological conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease (Handschin and Spiegelman, 2006). Here, we focus on conditions that have been associated with mitochondrial dysfunctions for a long time, namely ageing and neurodegenerative disorders (see Fig. 2).

Ageing

Ageing is a complex and heterogeneous condition that encompasses several changes that are occurring over time. Indeed, a failure to meet energetic demands, dysfunctions in

several physiological processes and increased stress contribute to the condition of ageing. Mitochondria have been at the core of ageing theories for a long time, owing to the fact that mitochondrial functions generally decline during ageing (Quinlan et al., 2011). For example, mitochondrial functions, along with the expression of

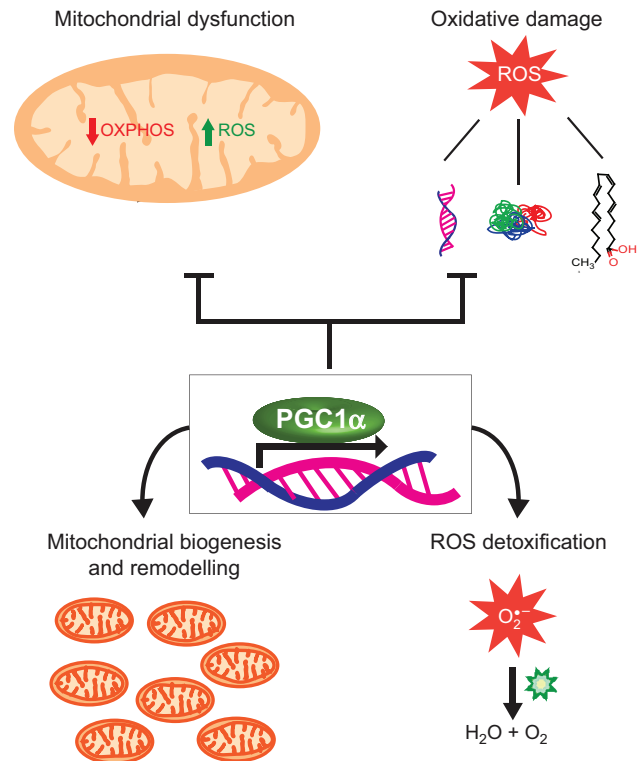


Fig. 2. Impact of PGC1 α in ageing and neurodegenerative disorders. For a long time, ageing and neurodegenerative disorders have been associated with mitochondrial dysfunctions, such as decreased respiratory capacity and increased production of ROS, as well as oxidative damage. Elevated PGC1 α levels ameliorate the phenotype of numerous mouse models of these pathological conditions, probably by increasing mitochondrial metabolism and ROS detoxification.

PGC1 α and PGC1 β , are reduced during telomere dysfunction, a condition associated with ageing (Sahin et al., 2011).

A prominent theory in ageing research is the ‘free radical theory of ageing’, which states that increased production of ROS by mitochondria and the resulting oxidative damage are important determining factors in ageing (Quinlan et al., 2011). Specifically, mutations to the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) are thought to have a central role in the age-associated decline of mitochondrial functions. The mitochondrial polymerase γ (POLG) mouse model (Kujoth et al., 2005; Trifunovic et al., 2004) has been instrumental in highlighting the importance of mitochondria in ageing. POLG is a DNA polymerase that is localised to the mitochondria, where it replicates mtDNA and is also involved in DNA repair. Mice with mutant POLG have increased mtDNA mutations and display alopecia (hair loss), osteoporosis and cardiomyopathy, all conditions associated with ageing (Kujoth et al., 2005; Trifunovic et al., 2004). In order to test whether increasing mitochondrial metabolism through PGC1 α expression could ameliorate the phenotype of POLG mice, these mice were crossed with MCK-PGC1 α Tg mice (Lin et al., 2002b). Mice that express both mutant POLG and PGC1 α have increased mitochondrial activity in heart and skeletal muscle, which leads to improved functions of these tissues compared with mice expressing mutant POLG alone (Dillon et al., 2012). These data highlight that elevated mitochondrial functions can have beneficial effects in ageing that are independent of the presence of mutations to the mtDNA. Importantly though, elevated expression of PGC1 α in muscle tissues throughout lifespan has been shown to delay the onset of some conditions associated with ageing such as sarcopenia (loss of muscle mass) (Wenz et al., 2009). These improved functions were attributed to a lower decrease in mitochondrial functions with age, as well as with reduced accumulation of oxidative damage (Wenz et al., 2009). Taken together, these studies illustrate that PGC1 α can delay the onset of conditions that are associated with ageing and help attenuate the impact of oxidative damage once it is present.

Neurodegenerative disorders

The first evidence of the involvement of PGC1 α in neurodegenerative disorders came from the *Ppargc1a*-null mice (Leone et al., 2005; Lin et al., 2004), which display neurodegeneration associated with hyperactivity reminiscent of symptoms of Huntington’s disease (HD) (Lin et al., 2004). Neurodegeneration in HD is characterised by the production of the mutant huntingtin (HTT) protein. HD is associated with reduced mitochondrial functions, and HD patients, as well as HD mice, show reduced expression of several mitochondrial genes and of PGC1 α (Chaturvedi et al., 2009; Chaturvedi et al., 2010; Cui et al., 2006; Weydt et al., 2006). Moreover, it has been shown that mutant HTT associates with the PGC1 α promoter and limits its expression, thus providing a further mechanistic link between HD and PGC1 α (Cui et al., 2006). Finally, breeding of HD mice with *Ppargc1a*-null mice exacerbates their neurodegeneration, whereas ectopic expression of PGC1 α in the striatum of transgenic HD mice protects these neurons from neuronal atrophy (Cui et al., 2006).

Several studies also support a protective role for PGC1 α in Parkinson’s disease (PD). PD is characterised by the loss of dopaminergic neurons in the substantia nigra and the presence of inclusions, referred to as Lewy bodies, which contain α -synuclein and ubiquitin (Lin and Beal, 2006). The expression of numerous PGC1 α target genes, such as those of the respiratory chain, is

decreased in PD patients (Zheng et al., 2010). In support of this observation, *Ppargc1a*-null mice are more sensitive to MPTP, a drug used to model PD in experimental studies (St-Pierre et al., 2006). Furthermore, PGC1 α protects against neuronal loss in cell culture models of PD (Wareski et al., 2009; Zheng et al., 2010). Recently, it has been shown that PARIS, a novel substrate of the E3 ubiquitin ligase Parkin, which is often mutated in PD (Lin and Beal, 2006), represses the expression of PGC1 α (Shin et al., 2011). Stereotaxic injection of PARIS in the substantia nigra of mice leads to neuronal loss that can be attenuated by co-injection with PGC1 α (Shin et al., 2011). However, prolonged ectopic expression of PGC1 α is unable to protect against neuronal loss *in vivo* mediated by α -synuclein (Ciron et al., 2012), which might be explained by a potential dose-dependent effect of PGC1 α in neurons, with modest expression providing beneficial effects, and moderate to substantial overexpression having deleterious consequences.

PGC1 α has also been implicated in Alzheimer’s disease (AD), amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and Duchenne muscular dystrophy. Expression of PGC1 α is reduced in AD patients and in the transgenic 2576 mouse model of AD (Gong et al., 2010; Qin et al., 2009; Sheng et al., 2012). Importantly, ectopic expression of PGC1 α in cell models of AD ameliorates their phenotype (Qin et al., 2009; Sheng et al., 2012). In ALS, it has been shown that PGC1 α improves the overall phenotype of various mouse models of ALS (Da Cruz et al., 2012; Liang et al., 2011; Zhao et al., 2011). Lastly, PGC1 α has been shown to regulate the expression of neuromuscular junction genes, such as utrophin and laminin, as well as decrease damage to muscle tissue in a mouse model of Duchenne muscular dystrophy (Handschin et al., 2007). Overall, these data highlight a potential protective role for PGC1 α in different neurodegenerative conditions.

Conclusions and future perspectives

In this Commentary, we have highlighted that PGC1 α orchestrates global aerobic metabolism by controlling both organelle biogenesis and remodelling. Studies of the impact of PGC1 α on cellular metabolism have been ongoing for some time. However, only recently a focus has emerged on integrative studies that examine the impact of PGC1 α on the composition and function of organelles, such as mitochondria and peroxisomes. It will be of great importance to understand how these PGC1 α -mediated changes in organelles contribute to the cellular adjustments in metabolism that occur during physiological or pathological conditions (Fig. 2). Also, the effect of the other members of the PGC family, PGC1 β and PRC, on organelle remodelling remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, much work is still needed to elucidate the physiological consequences of the post-translational modifications of PGC1 α and the underlying molecular mechanisms.

Finally, we discussed the role of PGC1 α in ageing and neurodegenerative disorders, conditions that are associated with altered mitochondrial metabolism. In general, increased PGC1 α levels appear to improve the phenotype of various murine models of these conditions, possibly by improving mitochondrial functions and ROS detoxification. However, importantly, even though PGC1 α is a central regulator of metabolism, its beneficial impact in ageing and neurodegeneration might be independent of its effect on metabolism. The potential deleterious consequences of large increases in PGC1 α will need to be considered in the development of drugs or therapeutic interventions where the aim is to elevate PGC1 α levels. Indeed, the beneficial therapeutic

window for PGC1 α could be narrow, and achieving precise induction levels might present a substantial clinical challenge. Nevertheless, it is the hope that discoveries on PGC1 α regulation and functions will eventually translate into benefits for patients.

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