

Carrier-Mediated [¹²⁵I]-T₃ Uptake by Mouse Thymocytes*

MARCO CENTANNI, GIANCARLO MANCINI, AND MARIO ANDREOLI

Second Chair of Endocrinology, Department of Experimental Medicine, University La Sapienza (M.C., M.A.), and the Department of Experimental Medicine and Biochemical Sciences, University Tor Vergata (G.M.), Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT. Thyroid hormone entry into the thymocyte, a thyroid hormone target, was investigated by incubating the cells with tracer amounts of [¹²⁵I]L-T₃. At 37 C T₃ uptake was linear with time up to 2 min, and then approached a plateau. The specific T₃ uptake, obtained by subtracting the uptake in the presence of excess unlabeled T₃, represented 48 ± 6% of the total at equilibrium. Unlabeled L-T₄, D-T₃, and triiodothyroacetic acid were less effective than L-T₃ in reducing [¹²⁵I]T₃ uptake. Kinetic studies on the initial rate of T₃ uptake indicated, for the saturable process, a maximum velocity of approximately 1 pmol/10⁶ cells · min and a K_m of approximately 0.8 nM. Lowering incubation temperature to 4 C resulted in a two thirds reduction of the total T₃ uptake. Washout experiments indicated

a different hormone release, being more rapid for cells incubated at 4 C than at 37 C; at 30 min 70% of labeled T₃ was released when incubation was carried out at 4 C compared to only 35% after incubation at 37 C, indicating the major intracellular location of the hormone at the latter temperature. An energy requirement of T₃ uptake in thymocytes was shown by sensitivity to oligomycin; the effect was dose dependent, showing a maximal decrease in specific uptake of 85%. The involvement of cation movement in the entry process of T₃ was indicated by the sensitivity to ouabain. These results indicate the existence of a stereospecific, energy-dependent, saturable process for T₃ entry in thymocytes. (*Endocrinology* 124: 2443-2448, 1989)

SEVERAL studies suggested that T₃ entry in target tissue is a carrier-mediated process, either active or facilitated (1-12). Some reports also indicated the involvement of sodium in T₃ entry into cells (1, 4, 13). More contradictory results have been obtained for cellular T₄ uptake (4, 6, 14). The mode of entry into cells may play a role in determining the ultimate intracellular bioavailability of the most powerful thyroid hormone, T₃. This T₃ availability comes from the intracellular 5'-deiodination of T₄ and from the circulating T₃ pool; the relative contribution of the two sources strongly depends on the tissue (15-17). Therefore, it is conceivable that in those tissues in which the contribution to intracellular T₃ by T₄ biotransformation is minor or negligible, the plasma membrane is an important regulator of T₃ entry and metabolic availability. Thymocytes represent such a tissue; they are target cells for thyroid hormones in which more than 80% of intracellular T₃ derives from circulating T₃ (15). In these cells plasma membrane high affinity

binding sites for T₃ were identified (18) and administration of T₃ *in vitro* increases 2-deoxy-D-glucose uptake (19-21) as well as amino acid uptake (22). Although these effects may be derived from hormone localized to the plasma membrane, evidence has also been presented that thyroid hormones enter the thymocytes (6, 15). The mechanism of entry, however, is as yet poorly defined. Since these cells also possess a well characterized ionic pump activity on the plasma membrane (23), they represent a suitable model for uptake studies involving ionic mechanisms. As a first step we investigated the general characteristics of T₃ entry in thymocytes.

Materials and Methods

All chemicals used in this study were purchased from Sigma (St. Louis, MO), except for ouabain which was obtained from Calbiochem-Boehringer (La Jolla, CA). [¹²⁵I]L-T₃ (3300 μCi/μg) was purchased from New England Nuclear (Boston, MA). The purity of labeled and unlabeled hormones was assayed by TLC on silica gel using formic acid/methanol/chloroform (1:3:16) according to the method of Sato and Cahnmann (24). TLC was also performed on labeled T₃ released during wash-out experiments after extraction with butanol as described by Sato and Robbins (25). Negligible deiodination was found under all conditions tested.

Thymocyte preparation

BALB-c mice, 3-6 weeks old, were obtained from Charles River Ltd. (Firenze, Italy). The animals were obtained at least

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Address all correspondence and requests for reprints to: Marco Centanni, M.D., 2° Cattedra di Endocrinologia % 2° Clinica Medica, Policlinico Umberto I°, 00161 Rome, Italy.

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3 days before the experiment, had free access to water and commercial food pellets, and were maintained in a light-dark cycle of 12 h. Mice were killed by cervical dislocation, the thymus was removed, and thymocytes were prepared as described for rats by Segal and Ingbar (19) with some modification. Briefly, the thymus glands were washed in Krebs-Ringer-25 mM Tris-HCl (KRT) buffer, pH 7.4 (containing 2.5 mM CaCl₂), and finely minced. The cells were then filtered through a nylon mesh, centrifuged at 1500 rpm for 10 min at 4 C, and finally resuspended in the same buffer up to a concentration of 20×10^6 cells/ml.

Uptake studies

Before the experiments thymocytes were equilibrated for 30 min at room temperature unless otherwise specified. Incubation was carried out in KRT buffer at constant pH (7.35–7.45) by adding 25 pM [¹²⁵I]T₃ to 500- μ l aliquots of cell suspension for the times and conditions specified in the figure legends. At the end of incubation, 200- μ l aliquots were layered over an equal volume of 30% sucrose in a Beckman microtube (Beckman, Palo Alto, CA) and centrifuged at 13,000 rpm for 30 sec. The tip of the tubes was cut, and the radioactivity in the pellet was counted in a γ -counter. Negligible radioactivity was found in the sucrose cushion when counted as control. When uptake studies were performed in the presence of inhibitors, these drugs were added only during preincubation; in control experiments they were also present during incubation, but no further effects occurred compared to those in the standard experiments.

The uptake of thyroid hormone was measured as the percentage of total radioactivity per 10^6 cells. Nonspecific uptake was determined as the uptake of labeled thyroid hormone in the presence of an excess (10 μ M) of unlabeled T₃. Half-maximal inhibition of T₃ was obtained by plotting the concentrations of T₃ (x-coordinate) against the percentage of specific T₃ uptake (y-coordinate); the value was obtained by the intersection on the x-axis of the line starting from the 50% inhibition point on the displacement curve.

All experiments were carried out at least in triplicate.

Washout experiments

At the end of incubation with [¹²⁵I]T₃ for 30 min, samples were centrifuged at 4 C for 10 min at 1500 rpm, resuspended in buffer containing 0.005% BSA for 2 min, and recentrifuged. Cells were then resuspended at 4 C in the incubation medium containing 10 μ M unlabeled T₃ for different periods of time. At the end of each period 200- μ l aliquots were centrifuged as described for the uptake studies. The radioactivity in the supernatant was counted to determine the labeled T₃ released into the medium. Negligible radioactivity was found when sucrose was also counted.

Cell viability was checked by trypan blue exclusion before and after the experiments; viability was greater than 95%, and no differences were found under any of the experimental conditions employed.

Protein content was measured by the method of Lowry *et al.* (26), using BSA as standard, and was found to be 40 μ g protein/ 10^6 cells.

Statistical analysis was performed using Student's *t* test for unpaired data, checking both upper and lower limits of the samples.

Results

In time-course experiments at 37 C T₃ uptake in mouse thymocytes was linear up to 2 min, then approached a plateau. At 4 C it was much slower, and at 30 min was only one third that at 37 C (Fig. 1). The same figure shows that incubation at 37 C in the presence of an excess (10 μ M) of unlabeled T₃ resulted in a decrease in [¹²⁵I]T₃ uptake at all time intervals, that was $48 \pm 6\%$ at 30 min. The remaining fraction represents nonspecific uptake and was used as a reference throughout the study. The addition of 10 μ M unlabeled T₃ during incubation at 4 C produced no further decrease in [¹²⁵I]T₃ uptake compared to the total uptake at that temperature (Fig. 1). At 37 C specific T₃ uptake (Fig. 1, ---), obtained by subtracting the nonspecific from control uptake, reached a plateau between 5 and 15 min of incubation (Fig. 1).

Specific T₃ uptake was saturable in the presence of increasing concentrations of unlabeled T₃ (Table 1). By plotting specific [¹²⁵I]T₃ uptake *vs.* competitor T₃ concentrations we obtained a displacement curve (not shown); from this curve (see *Materials and Methods*) it appeared that the concentration of unlabeled T₃ necessary to obtain 50% inhibition of [¹²⁵I]T₃ uptake was 550 nM. A comparison of the analog effect on [¹²⁵I]T₃ uptake is also reported in Table 1. The effects of unlabeled L-T₄, D-T₃, and triiodothyroacetic acid (TRIAc; 1 or 10 μ M) were compared at 30 min of incubation to that of equal amounts of L-T₃. The results show that L-T₃ is the most powerful in displacing labeled T₃ from these low

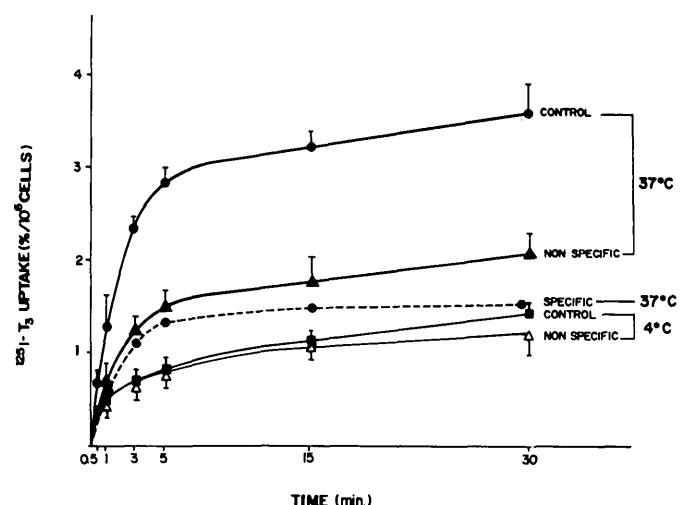


FIG. 1. Time course of [¹²⁵I]L-T₃ uptake. Thymocytes ($10\text{--}20 \times 10^6$ cells/ml) were incubated with [¹²⁵I]T₃ (25 pM) for the indicated times at pH 7.4 (± 0.05) in the absence (\bullet , 37 C; \blacksquare , 4 C) or presence (\blacktriangle , 37 C; \triangle , 4 C) of 10 μ M unlabeled T₃. The values are the mean \pm SD of four experiments. The specific T₃ uptake at 37 C ($\bullet\text{---}\bullet$) was calculated by subtracting nonspecific from total uptake.

TABLE 1. Effect of increasing concentrations of iodothyronine analogs on [¹²⁵I]T₃ uptake

Conc. (M)	% of specific uptake/10 ⁶ cells	% of control
L-T ₃		
10 ⁻⁹	1.13 ± 0.21	68.5
10 ⁻⁸	1.10 ± 0.20	67.0
10 ⁻⁷	1.00 ± 0.18	60.1
10 ⁻⁶	0.70 ± 0.15	42.0
10 ⁻⁵	0.0 ± 0.13	0.0
D-T ₃		
10 ⁻⁶	1.27 ± 0.47	77.0
10 ⁻⁵	1.20 ± 0.17	72.7
L-T ₄		
10 ⁻⁶	1.23 ± 0.15	74.5
10 ⁻⁵	0.90 ± 0.13	54.5
TRIAIC		
10 ⁻⁶	1.27 ± 0.25	77.0
10 ⁻⁵	1.25 ± 0.20	75.8

Thymocytes (10–20 × 10⁶/ml) were incubated in KRT at 37 C, pH 7.40 (±0.05) with 25 pM labeled T₃ in the presence or absence of the indicated concentrations of analogs. Results are the mean ± SD of at least four different experiments.

affinity binding sites, and the analogs can be placed in rank order of decreasing inhibitory effect as follows: L-T₃ > L-T₄ > D-T₃ = TRIAC, showing that the binding sites are stereospecific.

Since the rate of uptake was linear in the first minute, we studied the initial, unidirectional uptake of unlabeled T₃ in the presence of increasing concentrations of unla-

beled T₃ to obtain kinetic parameters at very low substrate concentrations. By increasing the T₃ concentration we obtained a nonlinear correlation that indicates saturability of the process. The nonspecific linear component, measured at 10 μM unlabeled T₃, was subtracted from the total, and the saturable process was analyzed according to Lineweaver-Burk plot. One high affinity binding site was apparent, with a K_m of 0.8 nM and a maximum velocity of 1 pmol/10⁶ cells·min, as shown in Fig. 2.

To investigate whether T₃ uptake represents membrane-associated or intracellularly located hormone, washout experiments were carried out. Figure 3 shows that efflux of labeled T₃, after incubation at 37 C, has two components. The first one, which may represent the hormone associated with the membrane (27), was rapid and caused the efflux of 21% of the hormone from the cell in 1 min. The second one, which is believed to be the efflux from the intracellular compartment, was slower and led to a maximum release of 35% at 30 min. When incubation was performed at 4 C, 40% of the hormone exited with the first component; a maximum of 70% was reached with the slower one. Therefore, it seems that at 37 C a larger hormone fraction is located in a less accessible compartment inside the cell.

To study further the characteristics of T₃ uptake we used inhibitors that are known to interfere with different processes: oligomycin as a metabolic inhibitor, ouabain

FIG. 2. Lineweaver-Burk plot of saturable T₃ uptake. Thymocytes (10–20 × 10⁶ cells/ml) were incubated with 25 pM labeled T₃ for 1 min at 23 C in the presence of increasing concentrations of unlabeled T₃. Each point represents the reciprocal of the mean of three different experiments.

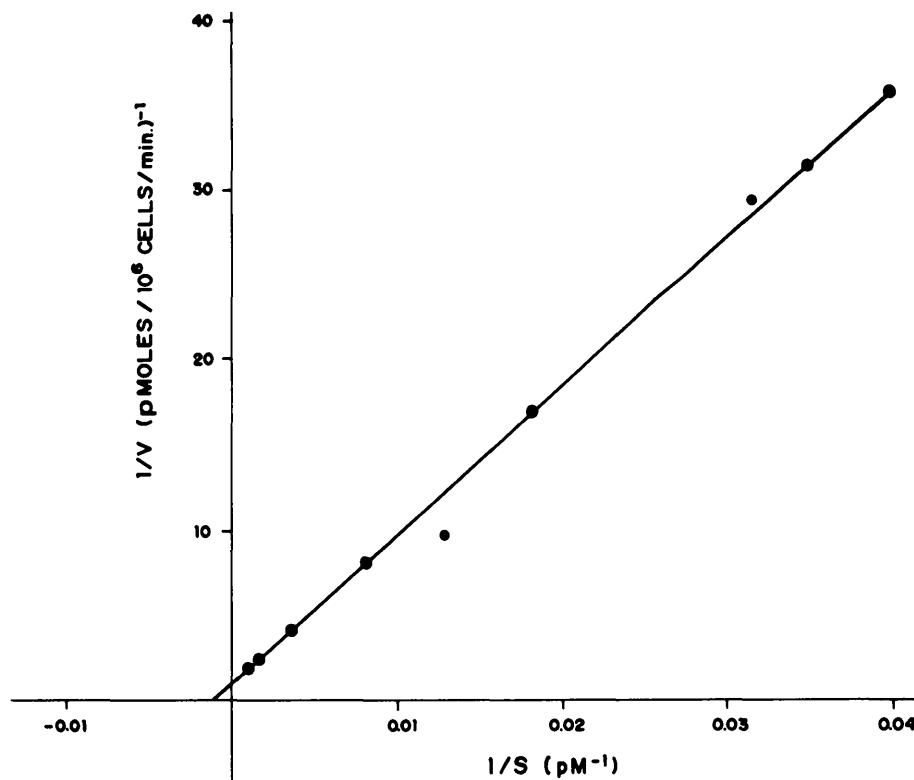


FIG. 3. Washout of the [¹²⁵I]L-T₃ incorporated into thymocytes. Cells (10–20 × 10⁶/ml) were incubated for 30 min at 37 or 4 C, washed, and centrifuged in buffer containing 0.005% BSA, then incubated again at 4 C in the presence of 10 μM unlabeled T₃ for the indicated times. The values are the mean ± SD of five experiments.

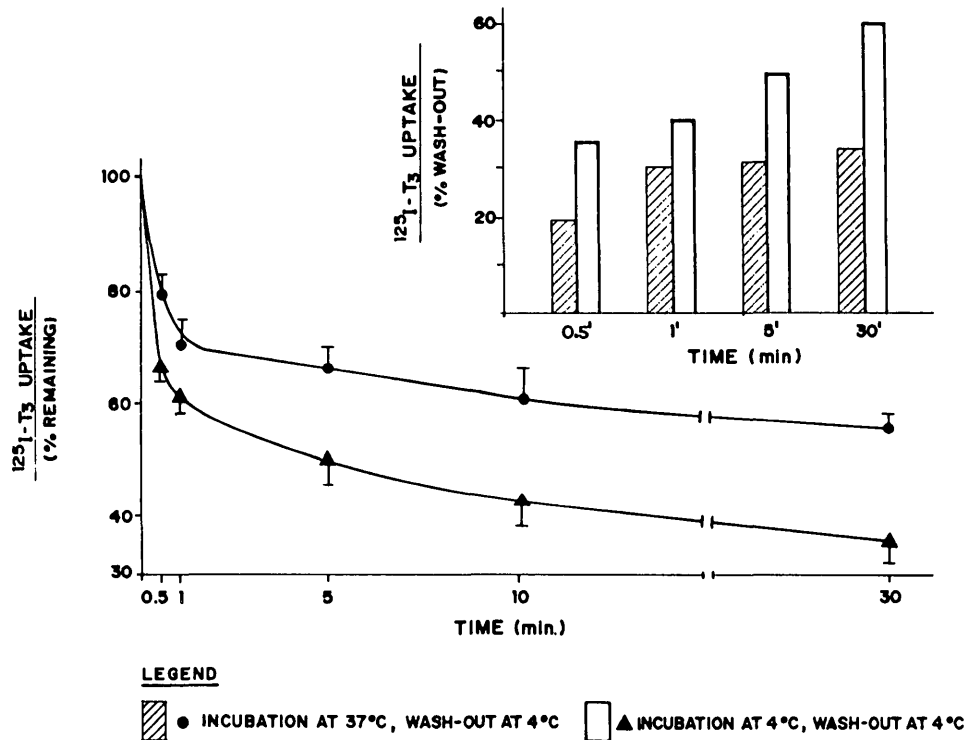
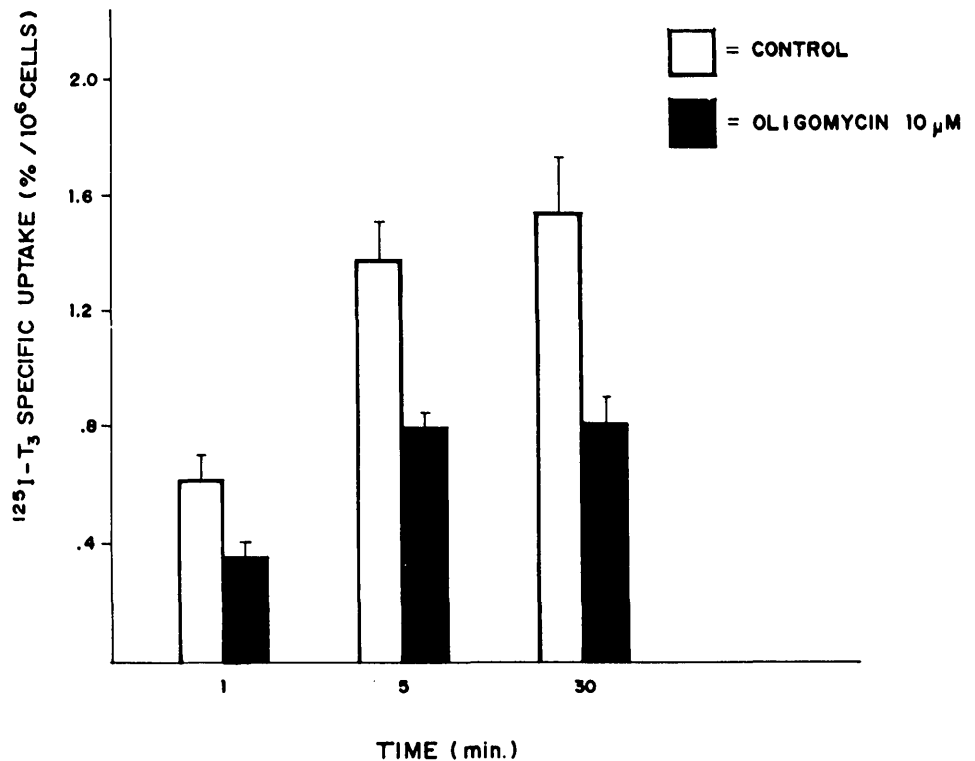


FIG. 4. Time course of the oligomycin effect on [¹²⁵I]L-T₃ uptake. Cells were preincubated for 30 min at 37 C and pH 7.45 (±0.05) in the presence or absence of 10 μM oligomycin, centrifuged, and then incubated in the presence of tracer amounts of labeled T₃ for 30 min under the same conditions. Results are the mean ± SD of three experiments.



as a specific blocker of Na⁺/K⁺-ATPase activity, and dansylcadaverine as a substance interfering with receptor-mediated endocytosis (see *Discussion*). Table 2 shows that preincubation with oligomycin resulted in a dose-dependent reduction of specific T₃ uptake that was maximal at 100 μM (–85%), suggesting that the process is energy dependent. Its effect was present after 1 min of

incubation, and the maximal effect was attained in 30 min (Fig. 4). Preincubation with ouabain also inhibited the uptake in a dose-dependent fashion (–79%), indicating the requirement for a sodium gradient across the membrane and the activity of the sodium pump for such a process (Table 2). This table also shows 80% reduction of T₃ specific uptake obtained by using dansylcadaverine.

TABLE 2. Effects of metabolic inhibitors on [¹²⁵I]T₃ specific uptake in thymocytes

Inhibitor	n	Conc. (μM)	[¹²⁵ I]T ₃ specific uptake (% of control ± SD)
Ethanol	3	0.1%	99 ± 4 ^a
Oligomycin	3	10	55 ± 5
Oligomycin	4	100	15 ± 4
Dansylcadaverine	4	10	47 ± 6
Dansylcadaverine	4	200	20 ± 8
Ouabain	5	100	42 ± 15
Ouabain	5	1	21 ± 7

n, Number of experiments, each in triplicate. Cells were preincubated for 30 min with the inhibitors; incubation with tracer hormone was measured in both the presence and absence of the inhibitor. No differences were found between the two conditions. Inhibitors were shown not to interfere with nonspecific uptake. All inhibitory effects were statistically significant ($P < 0.001$) unless otherwise specified.

^a $P = NS$.

Discussion

Whether thyroid hormone entry into cells is mediated by a passive, facilitated, or active process is still a matter of controversy. The dissimilar behavior of T₃ and T₄ in some tissues raises a further unresolved question.

The present results indicate that T₃ uptake in mouse thymocytes involves an energy-dependent, saturable process. At equilibrium, half-maximal inhibition of the saturable process was comparable to that of the low affinity system found in other tissues, whose K_m ranges between 50–400 nM (3, 6, 11, 12). Initial rate studies, however, performed at low substrate concentrations, revealed the presence of a further saturable process with an apparent K_m of 0.8 nM and a maximum velocity of 1 pmol/10⁶ cells · min, that was not evident at equilibrium. These kinetic parameters are fairly similar to those reported for the high affinity system in hepatocytes (4), human red cell ghosts (7), and fibroblasts (8) and believed by the same researcher to represent an active transport system. Moreover, van Doorn *et al.* (15) showed a 2.26 tissue/plasma gradient in rat thymus; in the present study, however, free intracellular T₃ was not measured, preventing us from reaching a conclusion about active transport.

The low affinity saturable T₃ uptake was stereospecific, since it was able to discriminate between L and D isomers of T₃, and unlabeled L-T₃ was also more effective than L-T₄ and TRIAC in displacing [¹²⁵I]T₃ from the binding sites. Since L-T₄ partially reduced specific [¹²⁵I]T₃ uptake, the question arises whether T₄ can share the same transport system as T₃. Many of the previous studies agreed with the hypothesis that a transport system operates for T₃ (1–3, 5–7) but not for T₄ (6, 12, 14). In hepatocytes (4), fibroblasts (8), and neuroblastoma

cells (28), however, T₄ was shown to cross the membrane by a carrier-mediated process. Our preliminary data (not shown) indicate that labeled T₄ uptake was not saturable even in the presence of 10 μM unlabeled T₄ and was equal to the nonsaturable fraction of T₃ uptake. This indicates that passive diffusion is the entry pathway for T₄ in these cells, in contrast with that of T₃, as reported by Galton *et al.* (6) in rat thymus cells.

T₃ uptake in thymocytes was reduced at low incubation temperature. Evidence supporting the hypothesis that T₃ enters the cells by a temperature-sensitive process comes from the fact that during wash-out experiments, more labeled hormone was released in the medium when previous incubation was carried out at 4 C instead of 37 C; this fact indicates that at 37 C a major fraction of the hormone is in a less exchangeable compartment that, as suggested by Henneman *et al.* (27), probably represents intracellularly located hormone.

The energy dependence of this process is indicated by the finding that oligomycin, a drug that blocks ATP production by inhibiting ADP phosphorylation at the mitochondrial level, also affects specific T₃ uptake. Oligomycin reduced, in a dose-dependent fashion, both the initial and the equilibrium T₃ uptake, showing a maximal reduction of 85% of the specific uptake. The possibility that this effect could be due to some nonspecific action at the membrane level is counteracted by the fact that the effect was also found when the inhibitor was present only during preincubation, and cell viability was unchanged at the end of the experiment.

The dose-dependent sensitivity of specific T₃ uptake to ouabain, the specific inhibitor of Na⁺/K⁺-ATPase activity, revealed the involvement of the membrane sodium pump; as in the case of oligomycin, the ouabain effect was present as early as 1 min after the addition of labeled T₃, reaching a maximum after 30 min. This finding also points to a role of the Na⁺ gradient across the plasma membrane, as described for active or facilitated T₃ transport by skeletal muscle (13), hepatocytes (4), red blood cells (1, 7), and fibroblasts (8), but in contrast to the report from Blondeau *et al.* (29) that indicated the presence of a Na⁺-independent transport of T₃ in isolated hepatocytes.

Cheng *et al.* (9) showed that T₃ enters the cultured fibroblast via receptor-mediated endocytosis. This finding was confirmed by others (5, 10, 12, 29, 30) based on dansylcadaverine inhibition of T₃ entry. The present results confirm the sensitivity of specific T₃ uptake to such an inhibitor; however, a nonspecific effect of this amine, by disturbing the pH gradient, cannot be excluded, since it was suggested that pH plays a role in T₃ entry in some tissues (13, 29).

In conclusion, the results indicate that T₃ enters isolated mouse thymocytes by a saturable stereospecific

energy-dependent process that involves the activity of membrane pumps and the sodium gradient. This fact suggests the existence of a carrier-mediated process and allows the study of thyroid hormone entry related to cation trafficking across the membrane in this tissue.

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