Correspondence

Mastermind is a putative activator for Notch

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During signaling by the Notch receptor, Notch's intracellular domain is cleaved, moves to the nucleus and associates with a DNA-binding protein of the CSL class (CSL for CBF1, Suppressor of Hairless (Su(H)), LAG-1); as a result, target genes are transcriptionally activated (reviewed in [1,2]). In *Caenorhabditis elegans*, a glutamine-rich protein called LAG-3 forms a ternary complex with the Notch intracellular domain and LAG-1 and appears to serve as a transcriptional activator that is critical for signaling [3]. Although database searches failed to identify a LAG-3-related protein, we surmised that Notch signaling in other organisms might involve an analogous activity.

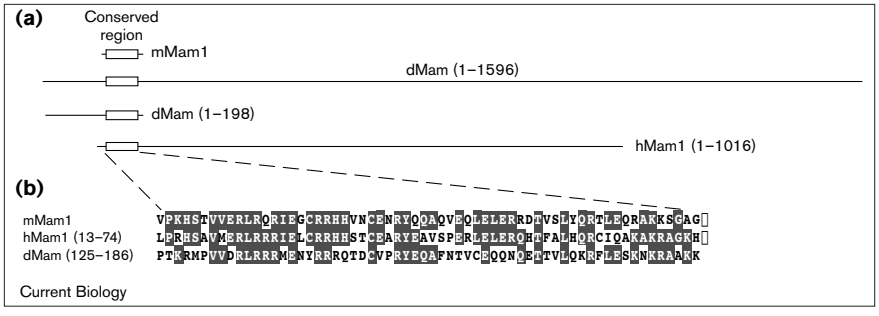
To search for a LAG-3-like activity in mice, we used a modified yeast two-hybrid screen similar to that used to identify LAG-3 [3]. Briefly, we used a complex bait to screen a library of mouse cDNAs fused to the Gal4 activation domain (Clontech). That bait included mouse CBF1 fused to the Gal4 DNA-binding domain (GD) as well as the intracellular domain of mouse Notch1. The bait proteins were co-expressed from a pBridge vector. Out of 6 million transformants, we recovered one positive with similarity to *Drosophila* Mastermind and human KIAA0200 (Figure 1a). We focused on this clone because *Drosophila* Mastermind is known to be critical for Notch signaling (reviewed in [2]) [4,5]. We call the murine ortholog of Mastermind mMam1, and the human one hMam1. The mMam1 fragment recovered in the two-hybrid screen consisted of 62 amino acids and included a conserved region present in both fly and human Mastermind proteins (Figure 1).

To explore the idea that Mastermind might have a role similar to LAG-3 in Notch signaling, we conducted a series of two-hybrid assays (Figure 2). We first showed that mMam1 bound mCBF1–GD in the presence of either Notch1 or Notch3, but not in their absence (Figure 2a). We next asked whether *Drosophila* Mastermind might participate in a similar complex in flies. We made a fusion protein carrying the Gal4 activation domain and the amino-terminal 198 amino acids of fly Mastermind (dMam (1–198), Figure 1a; henceforth called dMam), which includes the conserved region of Mastermind that is critical for complex formation among mouse components. We found that dMam bound Su(H) strongly in the presence of the fly Notch intracellular domain, but not in its absence (Figure 2b).

We next explored the interchangeability of proteins from different species. Remarkably, the fly protein, dMam, interacted with murine Notch1 or Notch3 and murine CBF1 (Figure 2c), and mMam1 interacted with fly Notch and Su(H) (Figure 2d). In contrast, *C. elegans* LAG-3 did not form a complex with either murine or fly components (Figure 2e), and mMam and dMam did not complex with worm components (Figure 2f). We conclude that both fly and murine Mastermind proteins form a ternary complex with either fly or murine receptors and CSL proteins. This interchangeability underscores the similarity between the fly and murine Notch pathways. Although murine Mastermind is not described, a full-length cDNA sequence for human Mastermind is available. Comparison of human and fly Mastermind sequences reveals only one short region of significant similarity that is limited to 60 amino acids at the amino terminus (Figure 1). Therefore, despite a low overall sequence similarity between mouse and *Drosophila* Mastermind proteins, the region crucial for complex formation is conserved.

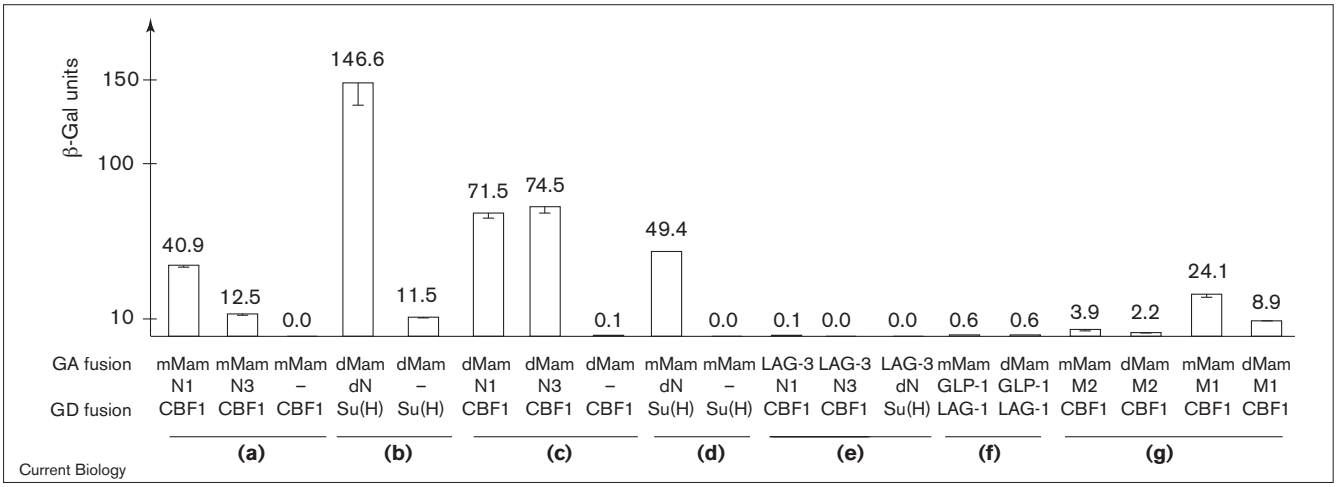
Finally, we examined the importance of the receptor's ankyrin repeats for complex formation. In *C. elegans*, formation of the ternary complex is dependent on the ankyrin repeats of the Notch-related receptor GLP-1 [3]. To ask whether the same situation holds for the murine complex, we used two missense mutants, M1 and M2, each of which bears amino-acid substitutions in the

Figure 1



Conserved region of Mastermind. **(a)** Mastermind proteins. mMam1 shows the fragment recovered in a modified two-hybrid screen for proteins that interact with murine Notch1 and murine CBF1; dMam (1–1596), full-length fly Mastermind; dMam (1–198), fragment of fly Mastermind used for yeast assays; hMam1(1–1016), full-length human Mastermind. The only conserved region between fly and human Mastermind is shown by the rectangle. It consists of only 60 amino acids and resides at the amino terminus. **(b)** Comparison of amino acid sequences of the conserved region; identical amino acids are shaded.

Figure 2



(a–g) Ternary complexes as detected by yeast two-hybrid assay. Activity of the β-galactosidase reporter (β-Gal) was assayed in triplicate for each experiment; standard deviations are shown at the top of each bar. To take into account differences in the self-activation by different bait proteins, the β-galactosidase activity was normalized by subtracting β-galactosidase activity of the corresponding bait proteins in the presence of the Gal4 activation domain. GA fusion, fusion protein with the Gal4 activation domain; GD fusion, fusion protein with the Gal4 DNA-binding domain. M1 and M2, mNotch1 with either of two mutations in the fourth ankyrin repeat [6]; in yeast, M2 and M1 were expressed at levels comparable to that of the wild-type protein (data not shown). The fragment of mMam1 comprised the 62 amino acids shown in Figure 1a; other protein fragments used were Notch1 (1744–2193), CBF1 (1–526), Notch3 (1665–2109), dNotch (1763–2224), Su(H) (110–594), dMam (1–198), LAG-1 (199–673), GLP1 (788–1171), LAG-3 (1–490). See text for further explanation.

fourth ankyrin repeat of mNotch1 [6]. Consistent with results in *C. elegans*, both M1 and M2 compromised interactions among Notch1, CBF1 and either mMam1 or dMam (Figure 2).

What is the role of Mastermind in Notch signaling? Previous studies suggested a role in transcriptional control. In *Drosophila*, Mastermind is a nuclear protein [7] and is bound to chromatin [8]. Furthermore, in *Drosophila*, Mastermind acts downstream of Notch in signaling [9]. The amino-acid sequences of both human and fly Mastermind proteins are rich in glutamine and proline (see below), a common feature in transcriptional activators [10]. In the work reported here, we provide a physical link between Mastermind and the major CSL transcription factor of the Notch pathway. We also show that the interaction of both mMam and dMam with the Notch intracellular domain and CBF1 relies on the receptor's ankyrin repeats (Figure 2g). These repeats are essential for Notch signaling and the transcriptional response. In *C. elegans*, point mutations in the ankyrin repeats severely compromise signaling by the Notch-related receptor GLP-1 [11]. In tissue culture cells, the M1 and M2 point mutations abolish receptor function [6] and compromise the activation of transcription by Notch signaling [12,13]. The simplest explanation for all these findings is that Mastermind functions as a transcriptional activator for Notch signaling.

We note important parallels between LAG-3 in *C. elegans* and Mastermind in *Drosophila* and mammals. First, all of these proteins form a ternary complex with an intracellular fragment of Notch and a CSL DNA-binding protein. Second, mutations in the fourth ankyrin repeat of the receptor compromise ternary complex formation for *C. elegans* [3] and mouse proteins, as we report here. Third, all three proteins are rich in glutamine and proline: 27.6% in LAG-3, 29.4% in dMam and 22% in hMam1. Fourth, LAG-3 and Mastermind function downstream of Notch in *C. elegans* [3] and *Drosophila* [9], respectively. We propose that LAG-3 and Mastermind perform analogous functions as activators for Notch.

What is the evolutionary relationship between LAG-3 and Mastermind? An intriguing idea is that LAG-3 and Mastermind share a common ancestor. The conservation in amino-acid sequence between Mastermind orthologs is much lower than is found for other components of the pathway: whereas hMam1 and dMam share similarity only in a stretch of 60 amino acids within a much larger protein (Figure 1), Notch and CSL proteins show high similarity (44.8% and 74.5% identity for hNotch1/dNotch and hCBF1/Su(H), respectively) over most of their length between these same species. It therefore seems plausible that the absence of similarity between LAG-3 and Mastermind may reflect a high rate of amino-acid substitution in these proteins rather than a distinct evolutionary origin.

Acknowledgements
We thank Rafi Kopan and Meera Saxena for providing mNotch1 plasmids. AGP is an HHMI predoctoral fellow. JK is an investigator of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

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A ubiquitous family of putative gap junction molecules

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Gap junctions are one of the most common forms of intercellular communication. They are composed of membrane proteins that form a channel permeable for ions and small molecules connecting the cytoplasm of adjacent cells. Although gap junctions provide similar functions in all multicellular organisms, vertebrates and invertebrates are believed to use unrelated proteins for this purpose [1–3]. The family of gap junction molecules called connexins is well-characterized in vertebrates, but no homologs of these proteins have been found in invertebrates [1–5]. In turn, only gap junction molecules with no sequence homology to connexins have been identified so far in insects and nematodes [3–7]. It was suggested that these are specific invertebrate gap junction proteins, and they were thus named innexins (invertebrate analog of connexins) [3]. Here, we demonstrate the presence of innexin homologs in different taxonomic groups, including vertebrates.

Using PCR with degenerate primers, we cloned sequences homologous to innexins from mollusc central nervous system and flatworm whole-animal cDNA (Figure 1). This finding is important because it refutes the hypothesis that innexin proteins could represent a specific feature of recently postulated Ecdysozoa clade ('moulting animals', including among others arthropods and nematodes but not molluscs and flatworms) [3,8]. Moreover, a database search using BLAST [9] for homology matches to the new mollusc and flatworm sequences revealed similarity to two human proteins: MRS1, function unknown, predicted from cDNA sequence submitted by G.B. Bolger and M.R. Steele (GenBank accession number AF093239) and a novel protein similar to MRS1 recently predicted from chromosome 22 DNA sequence (hPanx2 in Figure 1, accession number AL022328). A PSI-BLAST search [9] unambiguously detected the same two proteins even when seeded by one of the original innexin sequences, the Unc-7 gap junction protein from *Caenorhabditis elegans*: with an *E*-value inclusion threshold of 0.01, the two human homologs were detected with expectation (*E*) values of 10^{-5} at the first iteration. In reciprocal searches initiated by the human homologs, the *C. elegans* innexins were detected with *E* values of 10^{-9} in the second iteration.

It can be argued that the presence of four (compositionally biased) transmembrane domains is a possible source of error while searching for homologous sequences. Theoretically, seeding BLAST searches with transmembrane region containing sequences may result in retrieval of similar membrane proteins that are, nevertheless, not homologous. However, in the case of innexins and related vertebrate sequences, because of the presence of a relatively well-conserved region containing two conserved cysteine residues just carboxy-terminal to the first transmembrane sequence, there is sufficient similarity outside the transmembrane regions to indicate homology: a PSI-BLAST search seeded by the hPanx2 sequence of the first putative extracellular loop flanked by only four amino acids from adjacent transmembrane regions with the *E*-value inclusion threshold of 0.05 revealed similarity to Unc-7 with *E* values of 10^{-12} in the second iteration.

Several sequences homologous to innexins were also detected among