Seizures, ataxia and parvalbumin-expressing interneurons respond to selenium supply in Selenop-deficient mice

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ABSTRACT

Mice with constitutive disruption of the Selenop gene have been key to delineate the importance of selenoproteins in neurobiology. However, the phenotype of this mouse model is exquisitely dependent on selenium supply and timing of selenium supplementation. Combining biochemical, histological, and behavioral methods, we tested the hypothesis that parvalbumin-expressing interneurons in the primary somatosensory cortex and hippocampus depend on dietary selenium availability in Selenop−/− mice. Selenop-deficient mice kept on adequate selenium diet (0.15 mg/kg, i.e. the recommended dietary allowance, RDA) developed ataxia, tremor, and hyperexcitability between the age of 4–5 weeks. Video-electroencephalography demonstrated epileptic seizures in Selenop−/− mice fed the RDA diet, while Selenop+− heterozygous mice behaved normally. Both neurological phenotypes, hyperexcitability/seizures and ataxia/dystonia were successfully prevented by selenium supplementation from birth or transgenic expression of human SELENOP under a hepatocyte-specific promoter. Selenium supplementation with 10 μM selenite in the drinking water on top of the RDA diet increased the activity of glutathione peroxidase in the brains of Selenop−/− mice to control levels. The effects of selenium supplementation on the neurological phenotypes were dose- and time-dependent. Selenium supplementation after weaning was apparently too late to prevent ataxia/dystonia, while selenium withdrawal from rescued Selenop−/− mice eventually resulted in ataxia.

We conclude that SELENOP expression is essential for preserving interneuron survival under limiting Se supply, while SELENOP appears dispensable under sufficiently high Se status.

1. Introduction

Selenoproteins are proteins containing the rare amino acid selenocysteine (Sec) [1]. The human and mouse genomes contain 25 and 24 genes encoding selenoproteins, respectively [2]. Co-translational incorporation of Sec requires several cis- and trans-acting factors, including selenocysteine insertion sequence (SECIS)-binding protein 2 (SECISBP2; [3]) and a specific elongation factor, EEFSEC [4], which

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cooperate to recruit Sec-tRNA\textsubscript{Sec} to the ribosome [1,5].

The notion that the trace element selenium (Se) is essential for the mammalian brain became apparent only upon genetic inactivation of selenoprotein P (SELENOP) in mice [6,7], because otherwise brain Se levels were protected by preferential Se transport to the brain at the cost of the rest of the organism [8]. SELENOP is a plasma selenoprotein containing several Sec that is made in liver, but also expressed in several other organs [9]. Inactivation of the SELENOP gene in mice significantly reduced Se content and selenoprotein activities in the brain and caused neurological phenotypes [6,7,10,11]. Subsequently, LRP8 and LRP2 were identified as SELENOP receptors preferentially taking up SELENOP into target organs like brain, kidney, and testes [12-15]. These and other studies arrived at a model for Se transport in mammalians that places the highest affinity, LRP8, will continue to take up circulating SELENOP from dietary Se restriction, because the liver maintains SELENOP into target organs like brain, kidney, and testes [12]. These and other studies arrived at a model for Se transport in mammals that places the highest affinity, LRP8, will continue to take up circulating SELENOP from dietary Se restriction, because the liver maintains SELENOP into target organs like brain, kidney, and testes [12]. These and other studies arrived at a model for Se transport in mammals that places the highest affinity, LRP8, will continue to take up circulating SELENOP into target organs like brain, kidney, and testes [12]. These and other studies arrived at a model for Se transport in mammals that places the highest affinity, LRP8, will continue to take up circulating SELENOP into target organs like brain, kidney, and testes [12] with additional 2–3 min and immediately put back, if they fell off. Then the animals were tested five times in acceleration mode (linear acceleration (VentiRack Bioscreen TM, Biozone, Margate, UK) according to German laws.

In-house score. In order to independently record the hyperexcitability/seizures and the movement disorder of SELENOP–/– mice, we established a simple scheme in which both aspects were scored separately. Normal behavior was rated “0”. Hyperexcitability/irritability was rated “1”. Additional periods of inactivity/freezing or undirected grooming were rated “2”. Grand mal seizures were rated “3”. Regarding the movement phenotype, a wide, “shuffling” gait was rated “1”. If the animal’s ability to move was significantly impaired, the animal was rated “2”. Severe problems to move or inability to support the body were rated “3”. “0.5” could be added to any score, if the observer wanted to note an intermediate phenotype. This score was particularly useful in predicting the survival of SELENOP–/– mice, since animals rated “3 + 3” were likely to die within one or two days and were thus immediately euthanized.

Rotarod. The movement disorder was quantified using the rotarod device (Ugo Basile, Comerio, Italy) essentially as described [11,17]. Briefly, after 3 min of accommodation in an arena around the running rotarod device, the mice were placed on the rotating rod (4 r.p.m.) for additional 2–3 min and immediately put back, if they fell off. Then the animals were tested five times in acceleration mode (linear acceleration of 4–40 r.p.m. within 5 min) with at least 3 min rest between trials. Since SELENOP–/– mice are hyperexcitable, careful accommodation of the animals to the apparatus was mandatory.

Western Blot: Protein extracts were prepared from brain tissue powder by addition of lysis buffer (50 mM Tris pH 7.5, 150 mM NaCl, 1 mM EDTA, 0.1% Igepal and protease inhibitor cocktail (Sigma)), followed by sonication and centrifugation at 4 °C for 15 min at 15,000 RPM. Extracts were electrophoresed on NuPage 10% polyacrylamide gels, transferred to PVDF membranes and immunoblotted with antibodies against GPX1 (1:1000 dilution, Abcam, Cambridge, UK), GPX4 (1:2000), MSRB1 (1:1000), SELENOT (1:400), SELENOM (1:1000), and SELENOF (1:1000). GPX4, MSRB1, SELENOT, SELENOF, and SELENOM, antibodies were kindly provided by Dr. Vadim Gladyshev, Harvard University. The SELENON antiserum 168 was kindly provided by Dr. Alain Lescure, Université Strasbourg. Anti-rabbit-HRP conjugated secondary antibody (Sigma) (1:30000) was used in all Western blots. Membranes were washed with 0.1% TBS-T, incubated in SuperSignal West Dura Extended Duration Substrate (Pierce) and exposed to X-ray film.

Enzyme activities: GPX activity was measured as described [7]. MSRα + B: MSR activity was measured by using 20 nM DTT, 200 μM Dabsyl-R or S-MetO (the R or S form of MetO is for monitoring the MSRb or MSRα activity, respectively), and tissue extract supernatant. After 30 min of incubation at 37 °C, the separation and quantitation of the Dabsyl-Met product were performed by using an HPLC method, as described [30].
Reduced glutathione (GSH) and oxidised glutathione (GSSG) determination: For analysis of GSH and GSSG concentrations in red blood cells, plasma was removed and cells were diluted to equal volumes by 0.9% NaCl solution. Samples were drawn with ice cold metaphosphoric acid and kept at 4 °C. Samples were centrifuged for 10 min at 1200 g. Supernatants were collected and separated into two aliquots for the GSH and GSSG measurements [31]. GSH was assayed by means of Ellman’s reagent (DTNB). GSSG was determined fluorimetrically after addition of o-phthalaldehyde. GSH autoxidation was prevented by addition of 50 mM N-ethylmaleimide (NEM). The glutathione ratio was calculated as the share of total glutathione bound in the oxidized form [2GSSG x (GSH +2GSSG)]⁻¹.

Malondialdehyde measurement: MDA was determined according to Wong et al. [32] with modifications of Sommerburg et al. [33] as the thiobarbituric acid (TBA) derivative. Phosphoric acid (440 mM), sample or MDA standard, and TBA solution (42 mM) were incubated at 100 °C for 60 min and then the samples and standards were cooled on ice. To neutralize the phosphoric acid and to precipitate the proteins before the neutralization was injected into the HPLC system, the samples and standards were diluted 1:1 (v/v) with NaOH (0.1 M) in methanol. Afterwards, all samples were centrifuged at 10,000 g for 2 min. Aliquots of the derivatized samples were injected into the reversed phase HPLC and separated by isocratic elution with phosphate buffer (50 mM, pH 6.8) at a flow rate of 1 ml/min and monitored at 532 nm.

Protein carbonyl determination: For determination of PCO groups, the method of Voss et al. was used [34]. After determination of the protein concentration, the samples were diluted to the same concentration of protein (1 mg/ml) and derivatized with DNPH solution. Sample loading, washing of ELISA plates and development was performed as described by Ref. [34]. The absorbance of the derivatized samples at 492 nm was measured and the concentration of protein bound carbonyls was calculated with standards of oxidized bovine serum albumin (BSA). Blanks of PBS without protein were subtracted from standards and samples absorbencies. Oxidized BSA was prepared by modifying solved BSA with hypochlorite. The carbonyl content of the oxidized BSA was determined according to Buss et al. [35]. Reduced BSA was obtained as described by Buss et al.

Histology: Brains of five weeks old Seleneo–/– mice and litter mates were immersion-fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde/0.1 M sodium phosphate buffer, pH 7.4 (PB). After cryoprotection in 30% sucrose in PB, brains were frozen on dry ice and stored at –80 °C. Sections of 25–35 μm thickness were cut on a cryostat. Nissl staining was done as described [36]. Immunostaining on free-floating sections was performed with the following antibodies: rabbit anti-calbindin (1:5000; SWANT, Bellinzona, Switzerland), rabbit anti-parvalbumin (1:5000; SWANT), rabbit anti-calretinin (1:1000; SWANT), mouse anti-glutamic acid decarboxylase (GAD67; 1:5000, Chemicon), rabbit anti-NPY (1:1000; Thermofisher), rabbit anti-somatostatin (SST; 1:1000, SWANT), mouse anti-glial acidic fibrillary protein (GFAP; Sigma). Immunoreactivity was visualized with horsedarshad peroxidase using the Vectastain reagents (Vector, Burlingame, VT, USA) and the M.O.M. Kit (Vector) with diaminobenzidine (Dako) as substrate.

Counting of neurons. PVALB+ interneurons were counted in a rectangular area marked in photomicrographs of the primary somatosensory cortex (S1BF) and expressed as neurons per mm². About 2000 neurons were counted per condition. In the hippocampus, immunoreactive interneurons were counted in each designated cell layer in the ventral hippocampus. 6–7 coronal sections were evaluated per genotype and antibody as indicated.

SHIRPA protocol. A modified version of the SHIRPA (SmithKline Beecham, MRC Harwell, Imperial College, the Royal London hospital phenotype assessment) protocol was used to test 23 parameters that contribute to an overall assessment of muscle, lower motor neuron, spinocerebellar, sensory and autonomic function as described [37].

Grip strength. Forelimb muscle strength was measured by a grip strength meter (TSE; Bad Homburg, Germany). Five trials within 1 min were performed for each mouse. The repeated measurements were analyzed by a linear mixed effects model [37].

Modified Hole Board. Spontaneous locomotor and exploratory activity as well as social affinity, anxiety and object recognition in a novel environment were assessed using the modified Hole Board test carried out as previously described [38,39]. One 5-min trial was performed for each mouse.

Electroencephalography (EEG). A transmitter was placed subcutaneously in the lower lateral trunk with the leads routed subcutaneously to an incision accessing the cranium. Trepanations (1 mm deep in the skull) were done with a microdrill on each side of the midline and 1 mm anterior of the lambda fissure. Microscrews placed in the drill holes directly above the dura and acted as electrodes for the EEG lead which is wrapped round the screws. EEG recordings were collected with an RPC-1 telemetry receiver (Data Science International), which was placed beneath the mouse cage at a sampling rate of 250 Hz. With the DSI PhysioTel® telemetry system, mice were monitored while moving freely in their cages. A miniaturized implant transmits the digitized data via radio frequency signals to a receiver. The data were collected with the Dataqsys® software.

Spectral analysis of EEGs. Spectral analysis was performed using 24 consecutive 10-sec EEG samples. Each 10-sec period was divided into 8 overlapping segments of 2.56 s. After band-pass filtering (1–40 Hz), elimination of linear trends and tapering, each segment was submitted to Fast Fourier transformation (FFT) resulting in the distribution of spectral power values in [μV²] with a frequency resolution of 0.488 Hz. The consecutive spectral evaluation of EEG signals was performed as described [40]. For feature extraction, the peak frequency of the power spectra and the steepness of the peak were calculated from each normalized power spectrum and averaged over 24 periods.

Statistics. If not otherwise stated, data of male and female mice was analyzed separately comparing mutant and control data using a Student’s t-test. Sex differences within the mutant or the control group also were determined with a t-test. Tables summarizing the data show mean values ± the standard error of the mean (SEM). The Chi-Squared test was applied for categorical data. Figures were prepared and significance calculated with GraphPad Prism Software (San Diego, USA).

Approvals. Landesamt für Gesundheit und Soziales Berlin, G0008/08, District government of Upper Bavaria, 112-01.

3. Results

3.1. Characterisation of Seleneo-deficient mice fed an adequate selenium diet

When mice deficient in Seleneo were fed a diet containing the recommended dietary allowance (RDA, 0.15 mg/kg) of Se, they developed a recognizable neurological phenotype between the fourth and fifth postnatal week. This phenotype consisted of a wide and dystonic gait, tremor, hyperexcitability, and even seizures (Supplemental Video S1). These phenotypes were observed on mixed, 129Ola/Hsd, and C57Bl/6J genetic backgrounds. Since there were no apparent differences in the neurological phenotypes among Seleneo–/– mice on different genetic backgrounds, the 129Ola/Hsd line was discontinued and biochemical and histological measurements were obtained exclusively from mice on the C57Bl/6J genetic background.

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.redox.2022.102490.

Reduced expression of selenoproteins in brains of mice deficient in Seleneo have been described several times, but seizures were described only in Seleneo–/– mice with the additional inactivation of Scly [41]. Western blot analysis on postnatal day 35 (P35) confirmed reduced selenoprotein expression in the brains of Seleneo–/– mice fed the RDA diet (Fig. 1a). While decreased GPX1 activities in Seleneo–/– mice have...
been described repeatedly, we show here reduced activities of the Se-dependent MSRB1 and its non-Se dependent isoenzyme MSRA in cerebellum, kidney, and liver (Fig. 1b–d). As expected, limited availability of Se reduced MSRB1 activity [30]. Interestingly, MSRA activities were also decreased, a finding reminiscent of reduced MSRB activities in MsrA−/− mice [30]. The remaining MSR activities are apparently still sufficient to keep changes in methionine-sulfoxides below detection limits in Selenop−/− mice (Table 1). These findings are in line with the genetic inactivation of MsrB1, which affected MSRA activity, but did not increase methionine-sulfoxide levels in brain [42].

We then assessed the expression of a number of anti-oxidant enzymes in the brain, but did not find any changes except for an induction of PRDX1 in Selenop−/− mice (Fig. 1e and f). Several biochemical markers of oxidative stress, including reduced and oxidized GSH, protein carbonylation, and malondialdehyde remained unchanged in Selenop−/− brains compared to controls (Table 1).

We wanted to obtain an easily applicable measure to relate the neurological phenotype of each individual Selenop−/− mouse with
To this end, we graded each animal according to “excitability” and “ataxia/dystonia” using an in-house score as explained in the methods section (Fig. 1g). This scoring was complemented by a more objective procedure, the fixed bar test. While control litter-mates passed the test by remaining on the fixed bar over 120 s, none of the Selenop−/− mice stayed more than 75 s on the bar (Fig. 1h). To us, their difficulty to remain on the 1 cm wide bar seemed to primarily depend on the dystonia of the hindlimbs.

In order to more comprehensively describe Selenop−/− mice and control littermates, 12 males (5 Selenop−/− and 7 controls) and 21 females (7 Selenop−/− and 14 controls) were subjected to a comprehensive phenotypic screen at the German Mouse Clinic (GMC, [37]). In the neurology screen, several abnormalities were noted in Selenop−/− mice, including tremor, impaired reflexes, reduced grip strength, inability to perform the wire manoeuvre, and increased lactate levels (Table 2). In the behavioral screen, mice showed reduced locomotion and rearing, as well as abnormal object recognition test results (Table 3). Generally, male mice appeared to present a stronger phenotype than female mice as previously reported by Raman et al. [21].

### 3.2. Reduced numbers of PVALB-expressing interneurons in hippocampus and cortex

We have previously shown that PVALB expressing GABAergic interneuron numbers are reduced in mice with impaired expression of selenoproteins in the brain [22,24,25,43]. We, therefore, stained ventral hippocampal sections for several interneuron markers and quantified their numbers in the various cell layers of the hippocampal formation. While Nissl staining did not reveal pathological changes, the number of GAD67 cells was clearly reduced in several layers of the hippocampus (Fig. 2a and b). PVALB+ interneurons representing the majority of GABAergic interneurons were reduced in number by up to 50% depending on the hippocampal cell layer (Fig. 2a and b). In addition, we found a reduced number of somatostatin (SST)+ interneurons in the stratum oriens in CA1 and CA3. The number of neurons expressing neuropeptide Y (NPY) was only reduced in the stratum radiatum in the CA3 region. In contrast, we observed overexpression of NPY along the mossy fiber tract (Fig. 2a, arrows). This finding is indicative of epileptic activity in the hippocampus and thought to represent a physiological reaction to limit excitation in the hippocampus [44].

When we stained brain sections from Selenop−/− mice for PVALB, we found a significant reduction of the number of PVALB+ neurons in the primary somatosensory cortex at P35, which was not apparent at P16 (Fig. 3a). P16 is the age at which the number of PVALB expressing neurons reaches its maximum in this brain area in mice (Supplementary Fig. 1). Feeding the mice with a Se-supplemented diet at 0.24 mg/kg ("high Se") rescued PVALB+ interneuron numbers in the somatosensory cortex (Fig. 3b). This Se content in the diet is below the level at which Byrns et al. found unaltered PVALB+ interneuron numbers in Selenop−/− mice [41].

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>RDA diet</th>
<th>RDA plus 10 μM selenite in drinking water</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Selenop−/−</td>
<td>Selenop+/−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced glutathione (GS) nmol/mg protein</td>
<td>4.36 ± 0.32</td>
<td>4.29 ± 0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxidized glutathione (GS) pmol/mg protein</td>
<td>85 ± 16</td>
<td>74 ± 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glutathione ratio (Q)</td>
<td>3.71 ± 0.55</td>
<td>3.36 ± 0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2GSSG/GSH + 2GSSG)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protein carbonyl (CO) pmol/mg protein</td>
<td>5.8 ± 1.9</td>
<td>6.0 ± 1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malondialdehyde (MDA) nmol/mg protein</td>
<td>0.70 ± 0.10</td>
<td>0.82 ± 0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methionine sulfoxides (%MetSO of total Met)</td>
<td>8 ± 1</td>
<td>8 ± 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are from five-week-old animals (n = 6 for each group) and are shown as means ± SEM. One-way ANOVA with Dunnett’s multiple comparison test.

\(c\) Mean different from Selenop+/−; no supplement.

\(\) Mean different from Selenop−/−; no supplement.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>male</th>
<th>female</th>
<th>Selenop−/− vs. Selenop−/− (P value)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tremor (present)</td>
<td>0/7</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>0.001 n.s.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locomotor activity (dragging)</td>
<td>17 ± 1.4</td>
<td>8 ± 0.8</td>
<td>12 ± 0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tail elevation (dragging)</td>
<td>0/7</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>3/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touch escape (no response)</td>
<td>0/7</td>
<td>3/5</td>
<td>0/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limb grasping (present)</td>
<td>0/7</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>0/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grip strength (none or slight grip)</td>
<td>0/7</td>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>0/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wire manoeuvre (falls off immediately)</td>
<td>0/7</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>1/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Righting reflex (lands on side or back)</td>
<td>0/7</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>0/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact righting reflex (absent)</td>
<td>0/7</td>
<td>5/5</td>
<td>0/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative geotaxis (turns and climbs)</td>
<td>7/7</td>
<td>0/5</td>
<td>14/14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data are from ten-week-old animals and are shown as means ± SEM or number of animals/total number of animals; n.s. not significant; The Chi-Squared test was applied except for locomotor activity (means ± SEM; Kruskal-Wallis-test (S-PLUS, Insightful). Selenop−/− and Selenop+/− mice were not different and thus results from Selenop−/− mice are not reported.

\(\) Some parameters, e.g. tail elevation, are seemingly in contradiction to observations made in 3–5 weeks old animals. However, since the more affected Selenop−/− mice died before reaching the GMC neurology screen, the data likely reflect the selection of less affected Selenop−/− mice for the GMC screen. Alternatively, it is possible that the mouse diet provided at the GMC during the initial screen contained more than adequate levels of Se (see Discussion section). The full list of results (12 tables) from the GMC behavior screen is available on request.

### 3.3. Effects of selenium supplementation on the movement disorder

We tried to rescue Selenop−/− mice maintained on the RDA diet by supplementation with sodium selenite in drinking water from conception. Supplementation with 1 μM Se was insufficient to fully rescue the movement coordination defect in Selenop−/− mice (Fig. 4a). Increasing the Se dose to 10 μM, completely normalized the rotarod performance of Selenop−/− mice compared to wild-type and heterozygous littermates (Fig. 4b). The same dose–response relationship and full rescue at 10 μM were apparent in the “excitability” and “ataxia/dystonia” scores (Fig. 4c), consistent with our earlier report using 100 μM Se.
supplementation from conception [11].

We then asked, whether we could identify a time window during which Se supplementation needs to be present. When we commenced Se supplementation with 100 μM Se in drinking water at birth of the new litter, Selenop^+/−/−) pups were still fully rescued according to their rotarod performance (Fig. 4d), while the same supplementation was ineffective, when initiated from weaning on P21 (Fig. 4e).

Next, we wondered whether withdrawal of an effective selenium supplementation would ultimately lead to a deterioration of the neurological phenotype of Selenop^+/−/−) mice. Thus, mice were kept on the RDA diet and supplemented from birth with 100 μM Se in drinking water until the age of 8 weeks. Se supplementation was then discontinued and the movement phenotype was detecta ble 5 weeks after Se withdrawal (Fig. 4f). The same mice were followed until the age of 21 weeks (13 weeks of Se withdrawal) and the rotarod performance was similar in Selenop^+/−/−) mice not rescued with Se (Fig. 4g). While these animals developed the movement phenotype, we did not observe hyperexcitability or seizures. By variation of the Se supplementation period, we established that the seizure phenotype of Selenop^+/−/−) mice was caused by cerebral Se deficiency during the first three weeks of life (Fig. 4h).

Whether it is developmental or degenerative cannot be concluded based on the experiments reported here. It may be degenerative, since Selenop^+/−/−)/Sely/−/−) mice developed seizures and loss of PVALB+ neurons at several months of age even when supplemented with increased dietary Se [41]. The movement phenotype, in our experiments, clearly has a degenerative component, as it occurred with a delay after Se withdrawal.

3.4. Effect of selenium supplementation on selenoenzyme activities in the brain

We then asked how the effective Se supplementation restored cerebro-selenoenzyme activities. GPX1 activity was fully rescued in Selenop^+/−/−) brains by 10 μM Se supplementation on top of the RDA diet (Fig. 5a). Increased Se availability even increased cerebral GPX1 activities above normal in Selenop^+/−/−) and Selenop^+/−/−) mice. Moreover, Se supplementation normalized MSRB1 activity in Selenop^+/−/−) mice, and increased MSRB1 activity in Selenop^+/−/−) mice, although not up to control levels (Fig. 5b). As described in MrkB1-deficient mice, MSRA, which is not a selenoenzyme, was also reduced in Selenop^+/−/−) mice and depended on MSRB activity (Fig. 5c) [42]. Taken together, these results suggest that the phenotypic rescue at 10 μM Se supplementation correlates with restoration of Se availability in the brains of Selenop^+/−/−) mice.

3.5. Epilepsy in Selenop^+/−/−) mice can be prevented by selenium supplementation or hepatocyte-specific expression of a SELENOP transgene

In order to better asses the seizure phenotype of Selenop^+/−/−) mice maintained on the RDA diet, video-electroencephalography (EEG) was performed (Fig. 6a). Spectral analysis showed a clear difference between Selenop^+/−/−) mice as compared to wild-type and heterozygous mice. The 15 Selenop^+/−/−) mice showed a spike-like EEG activity of 7–9 Hz, while the 26 wild-type and 9 heterozygous mice showed a lower frequency activity (Supplementary Fig. 2). Thus, the automatic EEG showed a high discriminating power. Increasing brain Se levels by feeding the mice with a diet containing 0.24 mg/kg Se (“high Se”) prevented development of seizures (Fig. 6a). A more physiological route of increasing cerebral Se levels, i.e. by transgenic expression of human SELENOP under control of a hepatocyte-specific promoter [18], also prevented seizure activity in Selenop^+/−/−) mice, even when maintained on the RDA diet (Fig. 6a). The transgene did not affect the Selenop^+/−/−) mice. In line with the observation that Se supplementation or SELENOP expression ameliorated the neurological phenotype and prevented seizure activity, PVALB-expressing interneurons were preserved in the primary somatosensory cortex (Fig. 6b). Astrogliosis, i.e. the enhanced expression of GFAP by astrocytes, was widespread in the brains of Selenop^+/−/−) mice maintained on the RDA diet and indicated brain pathology in these mice. Astrogliosis was prevented in Selenop^+/−/−) mice fed the high Se diet. Even if fed the RDA diet, Selenop^+/−/−) mice could be rescued, when carrying one allele of a hepatocyte-specific SELENOP transgene (Fig. 6b). Taken together, these results suggest that seizure activity in Selenop^+/−/−) mice correlates with reduced cortical PVALB expressing interneuron numbers and increased GFAP expression. These phenotypes can be rescued by increased dietary Se or transgenic expression of SELENOP in liver. Thus, SELENOP is required to provide bioavailable Se to the brain, where PVALB+ interneurons depend on it. This concept is consistent with the expression of the SELENOP-receptor, ApoER2/LRP8, on PVALB+ GABAergic interneurons [27].

4. Discussion

Selenop^+/−/−) mice are the first experimental animal model that allowed to substantially decrease cerebral Se levels and study the neurological consequences of selenoprotein deficiency in the mammalian brain [6,7]. Yet, the neurological phenotypes were found very sensitive to dietary Se levels. Standard breeding diets often contain supra-nutritional levels of Se.
selenite (e.g. 0.25 mg/kg Se), which is not a normal dietary source of Se for mice or men, and is able to reach the brain bypassing SELENOP-dependent routes [20, 41]. Other researchers have kept Selenop/−/− on a Se-deficient Torula yeast diet (0.06–0.08 mg/kg Se), thus potentiating their phenotype, or on a supra-nutritional Se diet thus mitigating their phenotypes [20]. So, what should we refer to when describing the phenotype of Selenop/−/− mice? What could be “standard conditions”? We decided here to explore the neurological phenotype of Selenop/−/− mice that were fed a diet containing exactly the RDA of Se for wild-type rats which is generally believed to apply to mice, too (0.15 mg/kg; [29]).

The phenotype of Selenop/−/− mice fed a diet containing the RDA of Se is dominated by two aspects: a movement disorder that has features of ataxia and dystonia, and a hyperexcitability that leads to seizures of either the grand mal type or absence seizures with or without automatisms of chewing or self-grooming behavior. In addition, tremor was often noted by different observers.

In this work, we show the first EEG analyses of Selenop/−/− mice, which objectively support the earlier observations of seizures in these mice (Fig. 6). Moreover, unbiased EEG analysis confirms that Selenop/−/− mice are indistinguishable from Selenop+/− mice. Dietary supplementation at 0.25 mg/kg from birth rescued the hyperexcitability phenotype of Selenop/−/− mice in our experiments as well as in others [20, 41]. The mice that were analyzed in the neurology screen at the German Mouse Clinic (GMC) were raised on RDA diet until transfer to the GMC. There, they were maintained on a standard diet at elevated (0.25 mg/kg Se). Thus, in hindsight, the Selenop/−/− mice that survived and made it into the EEG analysis at ten weeks of age were rescued by a diet containing more Se than the RDA. Audiogenic seizure activity was reported in Selenop/−/− mice fed 0.25 mg/kg Se, but only when the mice were, in addition, genetically deficient in selenocysteine lyase, SCLY [41]. This observation suggests that Se liberated by SCLY from Sec contributes to the available Se pool in the brain. Consistent with these findings, hippocampal synaptic function was moderately altered in Selenop/−/− mice, albeit these mice were rescued with a diet containing excessive Se (1 mg/kg as selenite) [45].

Fig. 2. Loss of GABAergic marker expression in the ventral hippocampus of Selenop-deficient mice. (a) Histological staining of ventral hippocampus from mice on P35. Arrows indicate the increased NPY immunoreactivity along the mossy fiber tract. (b) Quantitative analysis of marker-positive interneuron numbers in different cell layers of the hippocampus. 6 to 7 sections of ventral hippocampus were analyzed from 3 animals of each genotype. DG, dentate gyrus; CA1, CA3, ammun’s horn region 1 or 3; s.m., stratum molecular; s.g., stratum granulare; hi, hilus; s.p. stratum pyramidale; s.o., stratum oriens; s.r. stratum radiatum; s.l-m., stratum lacunosum moleculare. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001 calculated by two-tailed Student’s t-test; scale bar 200 μm.
The movement coordination defect of Selenop−/− mice was reported several times [10,11,17,18,21,41,45], but mostly the mice were fed either with a Se-deficient or a supra-nutritional Se diet. Sometimes the diets were switched around weaning, further complicating evaluation. Here, we kept the breeding females and their litters on the Se-adequate RDA diet and explored the timing and dose-response of Se-supplementation via the drinking water (Fig. 4). We chose this route, because selenite supplementation provided via the drinking water to breastfeeding mothers was known to be passed to the suckling offspring [11,17]. Careful investigation of the timing of supplementation was important, because Se supplementation from weaning was too late to rescue the movement phenotype (Fig. 4e), while Se supplementation of the mother from birth was still effective. We also showed that a Se supplementation of 10 μM selenite in drinking water on top of the RDA diet completely rescued cerebral GPX1 activity, although this supplementation was not entirely sufficient to normalize cerebral MSRB activity (Fig. 5). Yet, this concentration was sufficient to correct the excitability and ataxia/dystonia scores (Fig. 4c) and the stride length of Selenop−/− mice [17], while 1 μM selenite was not enough to achieve either. Based on our observations of Selenop−/− mice kept on different defined and closely monitored diets, we suppose now that the diet which we had used in our first studies did not contain the 0.24 mg/kg Se printed on the label, but was most probably very close to the RDA level of 0.15 mg/kg [7,11]. In fact, a prospective study of the Se content in “standard breeding diet” used in our animal facility revealed that the diet ranged between 0.16 and 0.28 mg/kg Se oscillating around the expected 0.25 mg/kg with the seasons of the year.

The results from the primary neurology and behavior screens at the GMC are consistent with studies by Pitts and Raman [21,27]. The latter studies used a standard lab chow containing 0.25 mg/kg Se until weaning and then switched the diets to Se-deficient (0.08 mg/kg) or supra-nutritional (1 mg/kg) Se. We bred the mice on a diet close to the RDA before we shipped them to the German Mouse Clinic, where they received standard lab chow (presumably containing around 0.25 mg/kg Se). In hindsight, this may be the reason why we initially lost Selenop−/− mice around shipping (5–6 weeks), but then the surviving Selenop−/− mice stabilized and passed through the screens.

The difficulties to control dietary Se levels in the Selenop−/− mice prompted us to choose an orthogonal approach and genetically inactivate or diminish selenoprotein biosynthesis in neurons. A hypomorphic tRNA^{Sec} allele, TrpSec, lead to hyperexcitability in mutant mice along with astrocytosis and reduced numbers of PVALB+ interneurons [43]. Genetic deletion of tRNA^{Sec} in neurons caused a hyperexcitable phenotype and pre-weaning death of mutant mice [22] which was similar to neuron-specific inactivation of Gpr4 [25]. These mouse models also have reduced numbers of PVALB+ interneurons in the cortex and hippocampus [22,25]. Neuron-specific inactivation of Secisbp2 also reduced cortical PVALB+ interneuron numbers and caused a movement disorder and seizure-like fits [24]. Pitts et al. reported normal numbers of PVALB+ interneurons in the hippocampus of Selenop−/− when fed a 0.25 mg/kg Se-supplemented diet [27]. However, they found a reduction of PVALB+ neurons in the inferior colliculus, a region previously identified as a site of neuronal damage in Selenop−/− mice fed a low Se diet [28]. GABAergic interneurons are important to limit excitation in neuronal networks. Their largest subgroup in the cortex and hippocampus expressed PVALB. Other subtypes express the co-transmitters NPY and SST. Here, we show that the number of PVALB+, SST+, and NPY+ interneurons is reduced in several cellular layers of the ventral hippocampus of Selenop−/− mice when fed with the Se-adequate 0.15 mg/kg Se diet. We also show that the number of PVALB+ neurons in the primary somatosensory cortex first reaches normal levels (on P16) and the numbers are decreased afterwards when the seizures occur (P35). Consistent with Byrns’ results, we found normal PVALB+ neuron density in the cortex, when the Selenop−/− mice were fed a 0.24 mg/kg Se-supplemented diet. Our findings suggest a degenerative loss of PVALB+ interneurons, which is consistent with their sensitivity to oxidative stress [26,46] and their expression of the SELENOP-receptor, LRP8 [27]. LRP8 is, however, not the only SELENOP-receptor in the brain, although it is specifically important for PVALB+ interneurons. Cerebral GPX1 activity was reduced in Lrp2−/− mice fed a 0.15 mg/kg Se RDA diet [13]. Feeding Lrp2−/− mice a low Se diet caused a movement coordination defect, albeit without reducing PVALB+ neuron numbers [13]. Along these lines, feeding Lrp2−/− mice the RDA diet did not lead to a movement coordination defect at P35 as in Selenop−/− mice.

![Fig. 3. Histological staining of PVALB+ interneurons in the primary somatosensory cortex.](image-url)
Thus, feeding a strictly adequate RDA diet helped to reveal that at least two endocytic receptors cooperate to bring SELENOP into the brain and provide Se to target cells.

Neurodegeneration in Selenop−/− mice is consistent with increased expression of GFAP by astrocytes, which was found early-on [20,22,25,43]. We show here that Se supplementation or expression of a hepatic SELENOP-transgene can prevent the astrogliosis along with PVALB+ interneuron loss and seizures. Neurodegeneration, however, occurs beyond PVALB+ neurons as shown by Nissl and silver staining [19,20,22,28,41]. Increased GFAP expression and reduced PVALB+ expression was also demonstrated in Selenop−/− mice and neuron-specific Secisbp2 knockout mice [24,41]. A recent study showed that SELENOP plays a role in hippocampal neurogenesis supporting proliferation of precursors and differentiation of neurons [47]. To our knowledge, these processes
have not been systematically studied in mouse models deficient in selenoprotein biosynthesis. Neuron-specific inactivation of tRNA\textsuperscript{Sec} demonstrated decreased postnatal granule cell proliferation leading to cerebellar hypoplasia, although the mechanisms were not investigated [23]. Inactivation of \textit{Txnrd1} affected cerebellar development, but only in the neural, and not the neuronal, lineage [48]. This finding suggested that TXNRD1 is important for non-neuronal cells.

Recently, a deletion mutation of 17 kilobases comprising the entire genomic region of \textit{SELENOP} was identified in Belgian shepherd dogs [49]. Homozygous dogs were affected with tremor, ataxia, increased muscle tone, and “episodic fits.” The authors reported “stress dependent extensor muscle spasms”, an observation that we occasionally made when handling \textit{Selenop}\textsuperscript{−/−} mice fed the RDA diet. Such stress dependent spasms were also observed in neuron-specific \textit{Secisbp2} knockout mice [24]. Histopathological analysis of homozygous dogs showed cerebral and cerebellar atrophy, axonal degeneration, gliosis, and myelin loss [49]. With the exception of myelin loss these findings are the same as in \textit{Selenop}\textsuperscript{−/−} mice, if not supplemented with supra-physiological dietary Se. Like \textit{Selenop}\textsuperscript{−/−} mice fed an adequate Se diet, affected dogs developed the phenotype in the first weeks after birth. Only one, unrelated, dog with the same homozygous deletion reached ten years of age showing a similar phenotypic range among \textit{SELENOP}-deficient dogs as in \textit{Selenop}\textsuperscript{−/−} mice fed different levels of Se.

Cerebral and cerebellar atrophy was the diagnosis of children affected by homozygous mutations in selenocysteine synthase, \textit{SEPSECS} [50]. This condition independently demonstrated the importance of selenoprotein expression in the brain thereby suggesting that the phenotype of \textit{Selenop}\textsuperscript{−/−} mice is caused by decreased cerebral selenoprotein expression and not by any other hypothetical mechanism. Mice carrying the same missense mutation in \textit{Sepsecs} died perinatally and had a deficiency of selenoprotein expression in the brain [51]. Most importantly, \textit{Sepsecs}-mutant mice could be rescued with a Se-independent \textit{GPX4}\textsuperscript{U46C} transgene [51,52]. That \textit{GPX4} is an essential selenoprotein in the brain is supported by the identification of patients with mutations

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**Fig. 5.** Selenoenzyme activities in forebrains on postnatal day 35. Effect of selenium supplementation (sodium selenite, 10 μM) supplementation in drinking water from conception. (a) GPX1 activity. (b) MSRB activity. (c) MSRA activity. Results represent average values ± standard error of the mean (SEM) of 6 individual mice per group. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001 calculated by two-tailed Student’s \textit{t}-test vs. \textit{Selenop}\textsuperscript{+/+}.

**Fig. 6.** Phenotypic rescue of \textit{Selenop}\textsuperscript{−/−} mice through selenium supplementation or hepatocyte-specific \textit{SELENOP} expression. (a) Traces of electroencephalography (EEG) measurements. Mice were maintained on a diet containing adequate selenium levels (0.15 mg/kg) or were supplemented with additional selenium “high Se” (0.24 mg/kg); representative data of 3–6 individual mice, (b) Immunohistochemistry against glial fibrillary acidic protein (GFAP) and parvalbumin (PVALB) in primary somatosensory cortex. \textit{SELENOP}\textsuperscript{tg} denotes one copy of the hepatocyte-specific human \textit{SELENOP} transgene. Scale bar 100 μm.
5. Conclusions

We present the neurological phenotype of Selenop−/− mice fed an adequate Se diet that is based on the recommended dietary allowance for Se. We show that these knockout mice develop a severe neurological phenotype including tremor, ataxia/dystonia, and seizures that is correlated with a loss of interneurons in somatosensory cortex and hippocampus. Dogs with genetic deficiency of SELENOP show a very similar phenotype. Our description differs from other reports on Selenop−/− mice that were fed diets containing either unphysiologically low or supraphysiological high Se levels. We suggest from our own experience that dietary Se levels for animal models in Se research should be carefully adjusted, monitored and justified in order to gain full scientific advantage of the respective model.

Author contributions


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Institutional review board statement

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Declaration of competing interest

L.S. holds shares of selenOmed GmbH, a company involved in Se status assessment. All other authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

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References
