

Ca²⁺ dysregulation in neurons from transgenic mice expressing mutant presenilin 2

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Summary

Mutations in amyloid precursor protein (APP), and presenilin-1 and presenilin-2 (PS1 and PS2) have causally been implicated in Familial Alzheimer’s Disease (FAD), but the mechanistic link between the mutations and the early onset of neurodegeneration is still debated. Although no consensus has yet been reached, most data suggest that both FAD-linked PS mutants and endogenous PSs are involved in cellular Ca²⁺ homeostasis. We here investigated subcellular Ca²⁺ handling in primary neuronal cultures and acute brain slices from wild type and transgenic mice carrying the FAD-linked PS2-N141I mutation, either alone or in the presence of the APP Swedish mutation. Compared with wild type, both types of transgenic neurons show a similar reduction in endoplasmic reticulum (ER) Ca²⁺ content and decreased response to metabotropic agonists, albeit increased Ca²⁺ release induced by caffeine. In both transgenic neurons, we also observed a higher ER-mitochondria juxtaposition that favors increased mitochondrial Ca²⁺ uptake upon ER Ca²⁺ release. A model is described that integrates into a unifying hypothesis the contradictory effects on Ca²⁺ homeostasis of different PS mutations and points to the relevance of these findings in neurodegeneration and aging.

Key words: Alzheimer; calcium; endoplasmic reticulum; mitochondria; neurons; presenilin.

Introduction

A critical role of cellular Ca²⁺ in neuronal aging was initially proposed in the late 1980s, in the form of the ‘Ca²⁺ hypothesis’ of neuronal aging (Khachaturian, 1987). Accordingly, brain aging is associated to an increasing dysregulation of Ca²⁺ homeostasis, which results in a sustained elevation of intracellular free Ca²⁺ concentration ([Ca²⁺]) and excitotoxicity and neuronal loss. It is now clear that during the initial phases of aging, intracellular Ca²⁺ dynamics undergo numerous and more subtle changes that culminate in synaptic dysfunctions and memory impairment, even in the absence of overt neuronal loss (Toesch & Verkhratsky, 2007). Such subtle alterations are dramatically increased and anticipated in age of onset in pathological forms of neurodegeneration and, in particular, in Alzheimer’s Disease (AD) (Khachaturian, 1994; Toesch & Vreugdenhil, 2010; Camandola & Mattson, 2011). Noteworthy, not only Ca²⁺ dysregulation is a common feature of the aged and demented brain, but elevated amyloid deposition, a histological characteristic of AD, can be also found in normal aged people. The mechanisms that determine the transition from normal aging to mild cognitive impairment and eventually to overt dementia are still matter of intense investigation. Understanding the precocious phases of Ca²⁺ mishandling in AD mouse models might shed light on the molecular mechanisms involved in this transition.

The large majority of AD mouse models are transgenic (tg) mice based on one or two of the three genes that carry the autosomal dominant mutations found in the familial form of the disease (FAD): that is, APP, PSEN1, and PSEN2, coding for APP, PS1, and PS2, respectively. FAD represents less than 5% of AD cases, but the causal link between the disease and the gene mutations is firmly established. Conversely, all other AD cases are sporadic, with APOE-e4 and age as major risk factors, but the pathogenic mechanisms have not been clarified yet.

In mammals, PSs are ubiquitously expressed and constitute the catalytic core of γ-secretases, endoproteases which, in concert with β-secretases, produce amyloid-β (Aβ) peptides from APP (Sisodia & St George-Hyslop, 2002). According to the amyloid hypothesis, mutations in APP and PSs alter the relative proportion of Aβ peptides and promote the generation of the more aggregation-prone Aβ42, thus favouring the early onset of FAD by amyloid toxicity (Selkoe, 1998). More recently, FAD-linked mutations (in particular those linked to PS1) have strictly been correlated with altered Ca²⁺ signaling (La Ferla, 2002). The key question is whether alterations in Ca²⁺ homeostasis are the primary cause of neuronal dysfunction, are secondary to other molecular defects (especially Aβ42 production) or are simply concomitant events that exacerbate the disease.

In cultured model cells, a large body of evidence suggests that PSs regulate Ca²⁺ homeostasis independently of γ-secretase activity and toxic Aβ peptide generation. Specifically, it has been suggested that FAD-linked PS mutations increase endoplasmic reticulum (ER) Ca²⁺ accumulation, resulting in exaggerated ER Ca²⁺ release (Guo et al., 1996). The so-called Ca²⁺ overload hypothesis was reinforced in the latest years by data suggesting that PSs, as holoproteins, may work as endogenous ER Ca²⁺ leak channels, whereas FAD-linked PS mutants, by reducing the channel conductance, favor the ER Ca²⁺ overload (La Ferla, 2002; Thinakaran & Sisodia, 2006; Bezprozvanny & Mattson, 2008). Along the same line, neurons from tg mice expressing FAD-linked PS1 mutations over-express the γ2-65 receptor (RY-R), an intracellular Ca²⁺ release channel, thus increasing the likelihood of exaggerated Ca²⁺ release and neuronal damage (Stutzmann et al., 2007; Camandola & Mattson, 2011). These conclusions, however, have been challenged by a number of recent studies, in particular: (i) direct measurements of IP₃-R opening probability reveal that expression of FAD-PS mutants increases the channel sensitivity to basal IP₃ levels (Cheung et al., 2008); (ii) the use of genetically-
encoded ER Ca\textsuperscript{2+} sensors demonstrates that different model cells, stably or transiently expressing FAD-linked PS1 and PS2 mutants, have a normal or reduced ER Ca\textsuperscript{2+} level (Zatti et al., 2006; McCombs et al., 2010). In the case of PS2 mutants, this latter reduction was because of inhibition of SERCA activity and increase in Ca\textsuperscript{2+} leak (Brunello et al., 2009); (ii) finally, in a thorough investigation of wild type (wt) and FAD-mutant PS1 expressing cells, it was recently demonstrated that neither wt nor PS1 mutants affect ER Ca\textsuperscript{2+} uptake, leak and steady state level (Shilling et al., 2012).

In this study, we focus our attention on Ca\textsuperscript{2+} dysregulation in tg mouse models based on a FAD-mutant PS2, that is, the single tg mouse line PS2.30H, homozygous for PS2-N141I, and the double tg mouse line B6.152H, homozygous for both PS2-N141I and APP Swedish (APPswe) K670N, M671L mutant (Ozmen et al., 2009). By employing different Ca\textsuperscript{2+} imaging techniques on primary neuronal cultures and acute brain slices, we demonstrate that Ca\textsuperscript{2+} homeostasis is similarly altered in both single and double tg mice; such alterations are qualitatively and quantitatively similar to those reported in human FAD fibroblasts and cell lines over-expressing PS2 mutants (Zatti et al., 2004, 2006). In both tg mice, neurons have similar reductions in total Ca\textsuperscript{2+} store content and response to IP\textsubscript{3}-generating agonists, albeit different A\textsubscript{β} levels in their brains. Furthermore, both tg neurons show increased response to caffeine and increased Ca\textsuperscript{2+} excitability. By employing recombinant fluorescent probes in neuronal cultures from tg mice, we also demonstrate an increased mitochondrial capability to take up Ca\textsuperscript{2+}, owing to a greater ER-mitochondria juxtaposition. In these tg mice, dysregulation of neuronal Ca\textsuperscript{2+} stores occurs at an early age and appears to depend directly on the mutant PS2 itself and not on PS2-dependent APP processing or total A\textsubscript{β} levels. A pathogenic model that accounts for the different findings with PS1 and PS2 mutations and centered on mitochondria Ca\textsuperscript{2+} toxicity is proposed.

**Results**

**PS2 and APP expression levels**

In this work, we have taken advantage of single (PS2.30H) and double (B6.152H) tg mouse lines expressing PS2-N141I, respectively, in the absence or presence of APPswe; for clarity, these lines were here named PS2-N141I and PS2APP, respectively. The PS2 mutant is expressed ubiquitously, whereas the APP mutant is expressed in neurons and thymocytes (Ozmen et al., 2009). Figure 1 shows that, in brain homogenates from 2-week-old tg mice and in primary neuronal cultures at 10–12 DIV, the amount of total PS2, compared with that of wt mice, was 1.8- to 2.2-fold larger in both genotypes. Accordingly, to a first approximation, the ratio wt/mutated PS2 is approximately 1, that is, similar to that found in FAD heterozygous patients. Regarding APP, in mouse brains and primary neuronal cultures at 10-12 DIV from double tg mice, its level was at least twice that of controls (2.3 ± 0.6 a.u., P < 0.03, n = 9 animals, and 2.90 ± 0.14 a.u., P < 0.01, n = 3 cultures, mean ± SEM), while in brains and cultures from single tg mice, it was indistinguishable from that of wt animals (not shown).

**Ca\textsuperscript{2+} release induced by IP\textsubscript{3}-generating agonists**

We have shown previously that, in rat primary neurons loaded with Fura-2, cytosolic [Ca\textsuperscript{2+}]\textsubscript{i} ([Ca\textsuperscript{2+}]\textsubscript{i}) rises, because of intracellular release, are substantially increased by a short exposure to KCl (Zatti et al., 2006). Similarly, when cultured mouse neurons were first challenged with KCl (30 mu) and then, after extracellular Ca\textsuperscript{2+} and KCl removal, with the 

![Fig. 1](https://example.com/f1.jpg)

**Fig. 1** Presenilin-2 (PS2) levels in whole brains and neuronal cultures from tg mice. (A) 20 μg of brain homogenates (lanes 1, 2, 3) and neuronal (neu) cultures (lanes 4, 5, 6) from wt (1, 4), PS2-N141I (2, 5) or PS2APP (3, 6) mice were blotted and probed for PS2 expression. (B) Statistics of PS2 expression levels in whole brain homogenates and neuronal cultures. Values were first normalized by their internal actin levels and then to those of wt samples. Data are mean ± SEM of nine independent brain samples for each genotype, or three independent cultures run in triplicate.

![Fig. 2](https://example.com/f2.jpg)

**Fig. 2** Reduced Ca\textsuperscript{2+} release in response to IP\textsubscript{3}-generating agonists in tg mice. (A) Representative traces of wt and presenilin-2 (PS2)-N141I neurons (10-12DIV) bathed in mKRB, exposed first to KCl (30 μm) in the same medium and then to CCH (0.5 μm) in a Ca\textsuperscript{2+}-free, EGTA (0.5 μm)-containing mKRB. (B, C) Bars represent the average KCl peak and plateau values, above the baseline (mean ± SEM, n = 86 wt; n = 45 PS2-N141I; n = 34 PS2APP). (D, E) Average peak and area values, above the baseline, in response to CCH (0.5 μm) (mean ± SEM, n = 36 wt; n = 20 PS2-N141I; n = 21 PS2APP). Only neurons responding to CCH were included in this calculation.
shows that addition of KCl (30 μM) caused a rapid increase in [Ca\(^{2+}\)]\(_i\), that remained elevated until perfusion with a Ca\(^{2+}\)-free mKRB containing EGTA (0.5 mM). Figure 2B,C shows that no significant difference was observed between neurons from wt, PS2-N141I or PS2APP mice in terms of KCl-induced peaks and plateaus. In contrast, substantial differences were observed between tg and wt mice upon CCH addition. In wt neurons, the average peak and area for [Ca\(^{2+}\)]\(_i\) rises in response to CCH were 0.37 ± 0.02 ΔR/Δt, and 7.68 ± 0.45 arbitrary units (a.u) (mean ± SEM, n = 30), respectively. These values were significantly reduced in neurons from both tg mice: 52% and 31% decrease in peak and area, respectively, in single tg, and 44% and 49% decrease in the same parameters in double tg neurons (Fig. 2D,E). When the metabotropic glutamate receptor agonist, (S)-3,5-dihydroxyphenylglycine (DHPG, 10 μM) was used as a stimulus, peak and area values were similar to those evoked by CCH in each genotype. Accordingly, in tg neurons also the response to DHPG was reduced in peak and area values: 34% and 37% in single tg and 50% and 41% in double tg neurons, respectively.

**Ca\(^{2+}\) release from ryanodine-sensitive intracellular Ca\(^{2+}\) stores**

Ca\(^{2+}\) release from stores in neurons depends not only on IP\(_3\)-Rs, but also on Ry-Rs. Figure 3 shows that, in wt neurons, the average peak and area in response to caffeine (20 mM) were 0.14 ± 0.01 ΔR/Δt and 1.90 ± 0.23 a.u. (mean ± SEM, n = 15), respectively. Despite the reduced response to IP\(_3\) producing agonists, neurons from both tg mice exhibited a significant increase in Ca\(^{2+}\) release upon caffeine stimulation, that is, the average percentage increases in peak and area were 38% and 96%, respectively, in single tg, and 38% and 76%, respectively, in double tg neurons (Fig. 3A–C). It is worth noting that, on average, in wt neurons the peak [Ca\(^{2+}\)]\(_i\) elicited by caffeine was about half that caused by CCH or DHPG and, as expected, it was completely inhibited by 1 h pre-incubation with ryanodine (20 μM) (not shown).

**Total Ca\(^{2+}\) content of intracellular stores**

The reduced response to IP\(_3\)-generating agonists in tg mouse neurons could be due to reduced IP\(_3\) generation, reduced IP\(_3\)-R density/sensitivity or reduced Ca\(^{2+}\) content in the stores (or a combination of these mechanisms). To evaluate the total Ca\(^{2+}\) content of intracellular stores in the cultured neurons, we took advantage of the Ca\(^{2+}\) ionophore ionomycin that releases Ca\(^{2+}\) from all, non acidic, intracellular stores, independently of IP\(_3\) generation. When ionomycin (1 μM) was added in a Ca\(^{2+}\)-free, EGTA-containing medium after KCl treatment, the average peak and area of wt cortical neurons were 0.65 ± 0.03 ΔR/Δt and 23.0 ± 1.35 a.u. (mean ± SEM, n = 16), respectively (see Fig. 3D). In neurons from single and double tg mice, the Ca\(^{2+}\) response to ionomycin was significantly reduced (about 35% and 28% for peak amplitudes, and 28% and 22% for areas, respectively; Fig. 3E,F). Compared with wt, neurons from PS2-N141I tg mice also lose faster the accumulated Ca\(^{2+}\), as revealed by applying ionomycin in Ca\(^{2+}\)-free, EGTA-containing mKRB at different times after KCl treatment (Fig. S1B). The reduction in store Ca\(^{2+}\) concentration was finally confirmed by directly measuring the ER Ca\(^{2+}\) level with a D4ER cameleon: after the KCl treatment, the D4ER initial fluorescence ratio value (YFP/CFP), reflecting the steady-state ER Ca\(^{2+}\) concentration ([Ca\(^{2+}\)]\(_{ER}\)), was significantly reduced in neurons from single tg mice compared with controls (Fig. 3G). Addition of EGTA resulted in a slow decrease in [Ca\(^{2+}\)]\(_{ER}\) that was strongly accelerated by addition of the ER Ca\(^{2+}\) ATPase blocker cyclopiazonic acid (CPA, 20 μM); further addition of ionomycin (1 μM) caused only a small drop (Fig. 3G), indicating that CPA was sufficient to completely empty the ER Ca\(^{2+}\) content, as observed in other cell types (Shilling et al., 2012). The drop caused by EGTA plus CPA was significantly reduced in tg neurons, a result that is perfectly consistent with the Fura-2 data (Figs 3H and S1B).

**Ca\(^{2+}\) stores in wt and tg mouse neurons in situ**

Cultured neurons do not reflect the complexity of the brain architecture where interactions among neurons and glial cells occur in their proper environment. Wt and tg neurons were thus compared in situ, using acute hippocampal (CA1) slices, loaded with the fluorescent Ca\(^{2+}\) indicator Oregon Green 488 BAPTA-1. Neurons and glial cells were distinguished by both their morphology and functionality, as previously described (Fellin...
Neuronal Ca\(^{2+}\) handling in AD mouse models, M. J. Kipanyula et al.

Fig. 4 DHPG-induced Ca\(^{2+}\) release is reduced in tg hippocampal slices. (A) Right, representative traces of cells responding to a puff (arrow) of DHPG (100 μM) for wt and presenilin-2 (PS2-N141I) mice. Left, representative CA1 regions in a wt mice before (1, upper panel) and during (2, lower panel) the puff. Pipette position is marked by the void arrow. Scale bar, 25 μm. (B, C) Average [Ca\(^{2+}\)]\(_i\), peak and area values, measured above the baseline and expressed as ΔF/Δt in response to DHPG (mean ± SEM, n = 8–11 for each genotype).

Table 1 Summary of DHPG-induced Ca\(^{2+}\) response in acute slices from wt or tg mice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ACSF</th>
<th>ACSF + inh</th>
<th>ACSF no Ca(^{2+})</th>
<th>Area ΔF/Δt (F0/Fo)</th>
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<td><strong>Neurons</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>wt</td>
<td>0.5 ± 0.03</td>
<td>0.36 ± 0.036</td>
<td>0.46 ± 0.05</td>
<td>2.63 ± 0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS2-N141I</td>
<td>0.35 ± 0.02***</td>
<td>0.27 ± 0.04*</td>
<td>0.26 ± 0.01***</td>
<td>1.64 ± 0.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS2APP</td>
<td>0.33 ± 0.04***</td>
<td>0.26 ± 0.03*</td>
<td>0.31 ± 0.02***</td>
<td>1.5 ± 0.45*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Astrocytes</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>wt</td>
<td>0.62 ± 0.06</td>
<td>0.65 ± 0.05</td>
<td>0.56 ± 0.05</td>
<td>2.65 ± 0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS2-N141I</td>
<td>0.41 ± 0.03***</td>
<td>0.47 ± 0.04***</td>
<td>0.33 ± 0.04*</td>
<td>2.03 ± 0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS2APP</td>
<td>0.38 ± 0.03***</td>
<td>0.34 ± 0.04***</td>
<td>0.41 ± 0.07</td>
<td>1.66 ± 0.3</td>
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Data are expressed as mean ± SEM of 8–11 slices from three different animals per genotype. Inh (5 μM NBQX, 25 μM D-AP5, 1 μM TTX). One-way ANOVA followed by Tukey’s HSD test show that values are statistically different from wt, *P < 0.05, **P < 0.01, ***P < 0.001.
et al., 2009). Mitochondrial dysfunctions (either metabolic, structural or genetic) have widely been documented in aging and AD (Swerdlow et al., 2010); moreover, endogenous as well as mutant PS2, but not PS1, have recently been shown to favor the physical and functional connection between these two organelles (Zampese et al., 2011). We first investigated the energetic state of isolated brain mitochondria from three-month-old PS2APP mice compared with wt mice. No differences were found in classical parameters, for example, respiration rate (state 3 and state 4) and Ca²⁺ retention capacities (Fig. 5A), indicating that, at this age, mitochondria from even double tg mice are not appreciably compromised. Of note, no difference in membrane potential, as measured by tetramethyl rhodamine methyl ester in intact cells, was observed in primary cortical neurons from tg and wt mice (not shown).

The mitochondria-ER Ca²⁺ cross-talk was then investigated in wt and single tg neurons expressing a camelion probe targeted to the mitochondrial matrix (4mtD1cpv) (Palmer et al., 2006). To simultaneously follow cytosolic Ca²⁺ rises in the very same cell, the neurons were cotransfected with a nuclear Ca²⁺ probe (H2BD1cpv) (Giacomello et al., 2010). The nucleoplasmic Ca²⁺ concentration very rapidly equilibrates with the cytosol, while its signal can be easily distinguished from the mitochondrial one (Zampese et al., 2011). Single neurons coexpressing both probes were imaged for Ca²⁺ experiments and challenged with a mixture of IP₃-generating stimuli (500 μM CCH, 100 μM glutamate and 100 μM ATP) after Ca²⁺ chelation by EGTA (2.5 mM) addition. Upon stimulation, the nuclear Ca²⁺ rises (nucΔR/R₀) of responding neurons ranged from 0.08 to 0.86 and from 0.04 to 0.37 for wt and single tg neurons, respectively, with a 50 ± 5.1% reduction in the average value of tg neurons (nucΔR/R₀; 0.32 ± 0.05, n = 22 and 0.16 ± 0.02, n = 25 mean ± SEM for wt and tg mice, respectively, P < 0.01), in agreement with the reduced Ca²⁺ content of intracellular stores, as measured by Fura-2. However, for similar nuclear Ca²⁺ rises in the range of 0.1–0.4 nucΔR/R₀, the mitochondrial responses of tg neurons were larger than those obtained in controls (Fig. 5A). Thus, the ratio between mitΔR/R₀ and nucΔR/R₀ values, measured within this interval, was significantly higher in tg neurons with respect to wt ones (1.18 ± 0.11, n = 13 and 1.63 ± 0.1, n = 19 for wt and tg neurons, respectively; mean ± SEM, P < 0.01). Furthermore, with respect to controls, a closer apposition between ER and mitochondria was observed in single tg neurons transiently expressing ER- and mitochondria-targeted GFP/RFP variants (Fig 5B, C). The Manders coefficient for signal colocalization, calculated on Z stacks, was 0.43 ± 0.01 for wt neurons (n = 40) and 0.48 ± 0.01 for PS2-N141I neurons (n = 50), with a significant increase (11 ± 0.02%, P < 0.01) in the latter. Similar results were obtained in neurons from double tg mice (not shown). Consistently, after in vivo fixation, followed by immunolabelling with antibodies against mitochondrial (CoxIV) and ER (Grp78-Bip) markers, similar findings were obtained in both tg mice (Fig. S5A). Compared with controls, the Manders coefficient of signal colocalization and the area of close apposition between the two organelles were larger in tg mice of 12–15 days (11 ± 3.8% and 14 ± 4.3% increase in single and double tg mice, respectively; mean ± SEM, n = 50, three mice for each genotype, P < 0.05; Fig. 5B, C).

**Neuronal Ca²⁺ excitability**

In brain slices or cultured neurons, spontaneous Ca²⁺ spikes are very rare. However, such spontaneous spike activity can be drastically increased in frequency upon removal of GABA-A inhibition. In particular, cultured neurons show numerous synchronous Ca²⁺ spikes upon addition of the GABA-A antagonist picrotoxin (PTX, 50 μM). In both tg neurons, the frequency, but not the peak amplitude, of synchronous Ca²⁺ spikes in response to PTX was significantly increased (about 60%), compared with wt neurons (Fig. 6). In the three genotypes, the pattern of synchronous Ca²⁺ activity was not modified by 1 h pretreatment with either thapsigargin (1 μM) or ryanodine (50 μM) (not shown). These Ca²⁺ spikes were generated by glutamate release because they were fully abolished by the AMPA receptor antagonist NBQX (5 μM) (data not shown), while peak amplitude and duration of Ca²⁺ spikes were strongly reduced by the noncompetitive NMDA receptor antagonist MK-801 (10 μM) (Fig. S6A). Furthermore, these Ca²⁺ oscillations were inhibited by blocking presynaptic Ca²⁺ channels through acute application of ω-agatoxin IVA (0.2 μM), a blocker of P/Q type Ca²⁺ channels (Fig. S6B).

![Figure 5](image.png)  
**Fig. 5** Increased endoplasmic reticulum (ER)–mitochondria Ca²⁺ cross talk and colocalization in presenilin-2 (PS2)-N141I neurons. (A) Wt (blue squares) or PS2-N141I (red diamonds) neurons co-expressing H2BD1cpv and 4mtD1cpv were bathed in mKRB and exposed to mixed stimuli (500 μM CCH, 100 μM glutamate, 100 μM ATP) 2 min after addition of EGTA (2.5 mM). The peak of mitochondrial (Ca²⁺(mit)ΔR/R₀) is plotted as a function of the corresponding peak in the nuclear (cytosolic) (Ca²⁺(nuc)ΔR/R₀). Only data from wt and tg neurons with comparable nuclear peaks (0.1 < nucΔR/R₀ < 0.4) are shown. (B,C) ER–mitochondria juxtapositions were visualized by confocal microscopy in wt (B) and PS2-N141I (C) neurons expressing mitRFP (red) and erGFP (green); yellow pixels indicate close proximity between the two organelles. Scale bar: 10 μm. (B’, C’)

![Figure 6](image.png)  
**Fig. 6** Increased Ca²⁺ excitability in tg neurons. Synchronous Ca²⁺ spikes were induced in neurons at 17-19 DIV by a 10-min perfusion with PTX (50 μM) in mKRB. (A) Representative traces of wt and presenilin-2 (PS2)-N141I neurons. Bars show the average number of Ca²⁺ spikes per min (B) and peak amplitude calculated over the entire period (C) for the three genotypes. Values are expressed as mean ± SEM (n = 19 wt; n = 21 PS2-N141I; n = 18 PS2APP).
In acute brain slices, perfusion of Mg2+-free ACSF supplemented with PTX (50 μM) leads to interictal like activity in neurons of the CA1 region (Gomez-Gonzalo et al., 2010). The frequency of the interictal discharges, measured as Ca2+ transients, was doubled in both tg slices compared with wt ones (mean ± SEM spikes per min: 1.26 ± 0.24 n = 10; 2.34 ± 0.42, n = 19 P < 0.05; 2.94 ± 0.60, n = 17, P < 0.05, respectively, in wt, PS2-N141I and PS2APP slices from 5 to 6 mice per genotype), a finding consistent with the result obtained in cultured neurons.

It should be stressed that all the Ca2+ defects described previously do not result in overt neuronal toxicity. In particular, when the apoptotic index of neuronal cultures was measured at rest and in the presence of stressors acting through ER Ca2+ release, such as hydrogen peroxide or ceramide – added either alone or together with DHPG – a trend to a higher vulnerability, albeit not significant, was found in neurons from the tg animals (not shown).

Role of Aβ

Both FAD-linked PS1 and PS2 mutations have been associated with altered Aβ peptide generation, resulting in increased Aβ42/Aβ40 ratios (Borchelt et al., 1996). The PS2APP mice were reported to produce similar levels of both peptides, whose content increases from 0.1 to 10 ng mg−1 brain (wet tissue) from the third to the sixth month of age, that is, when the first amyloid deposits are detectable in the cortex and hippocampus (Richards et al., 2003; Ozmen et al., 2009). Conversely, the PS2-N141I line (not previously tested) is expected to have a much reduced total Aβ load compared with the PS2APP line. The question thus arises as to whether the effects on the ER/mitochondria Ca2+ handling and excitability depend primarily on the mutant PS2 or on the Aβ production. We thus measured the amount of total Aβ load in the brain of tg mice at 2 weeks of age (i.e., when brain slices were prepared for Ca2+ measurements). Compared with controls, the Aβ42 levels were 4 and 40 times larger in single and double tg mice, respectively (Fig. S7A), ranging from 4 to 40 pg mg−1 wet tissue (1–10 pmol g−1), at least 102 times smaller than that found at 6 months of age in amyloid seeding brains (Ozmen et al., 2009). Moreover, while in double tg mouse brains the Aβ42/Aβ40 ratio was close to one, as expected (Ozmen et al., 2009), in the single tg animals it was higher than in wt, but well below one (Fig. S7B).

Discussion

The mechanisms underlying neuronal dysfunction in the so-called sporadic AD cases is still debated and clearly involve genetic predisposition, environmental components and, primarily, age factors. A major limitation for research on sporadic AD is the lack of suitable animal models. In contrast, major breakthroughs in understanding the disease pathogenesis have been obtained from studies based on the rare FAD cases linked to autosomal dominant mutations in APP and PSs. Although no consensus has yet been reached, many studies suggest that alterations of neuronal Ca2+ homeostasis characterize normal brain aging as well as several neurodegenerative disorders; though, it remains unknown whether such modifications of Ca2+ handling are a late consequence or a primary cause of neuronal dysfunction (Toescu & Verkhratsky, 2007; Toescu & Vreugdenhil, 2010). Of note, the fact that PSs play a regulatory role in ER Ca2+ uptake and release has received much attention in the AD field (Thinakaran & Sisodia, 2006). Evidence accumulated for many years has established a strong relationship between FAD-linked PS mutations and dysregulation of intracellular Ca2+ homeostasis (Camandola & Mattson, 2011). The issue is still quite confusing at the moment, as contradictory results have been obtained by different laboratories using different approaches. A key problem for solving these discrepancies is the choice of the experimental models. The most relevant ones are probably tg mice, as they express mutant PS at quasi-normal levels. Moreover, they can be analyzed before the onset of any neurological defect, thus clarifying whether alterations of Ca2+ signaling anticipate, are concomitant or follow the other pathological signs, such as increase in Aβ load and plaque deposition, synapse restructuring, astroglisis and neuronal loss.

Here, we have taken advantage of two tg mouse lines: PS2.30H, expressing only the PS2-N141I, and B6.152H, expressing also the APPswe. Of note, both lines have PS2 levels quite similar to those found in wt animals. We have studied the characteristics of the Ca2+ response both in primary neuronal cultures, obtained from neonatal pups, and in acute brain slices from 2-week-old mice. At this age, total Aβ levels are still very low, but already detectable and higher in the double tg line. As to the choice of tg mice carrying a FAD-linked PS2 mutant, rather than one of the most commonly employed PS1 mutant, it is based on two considerations: (i) we have extensively characterized a number of PS2 mutants in cell lines or human FAD fibroblasts with consistent and reproducible findings; (ii) the phenotypic characteristics of FAD patients bearing mutations in PS1 or PS2 are practically indistinguishable, but for milder aggressiveness and later onset, usually, in PS2-linked FAD cases. Thus, if an alteration in Ca2+ homeostasis is causal in the disease, the prediction is that it should be, at least qualitatively, similar for both PS1 and PS2 mutants.

The data here presented demonstrate unambiguously that what was observed in transiently expressing cell lines and neurons does not depend on artefacts of protein over-expression, but represents an intrinsic specific action of FAD-mutant PS2 in modulating Ca2+ handling. In particular, the reduction in ER Ca2+ content (as assayed indirectly from the cytosol by discharging the organellar Ca2+ with ionomycin or IP3-generating agonists, and directly from inside the organelle by measuring Ca2+ levels with a specific ER probe) is of similar entity to that previously estimated in cell lines transiently over-expressing the same mutant PS2 at high levels (Zatti et al., 2006; Zampese et al., 2011). Most important, the same extent of reduction was found in neurons of acute brain slices. Thus, the altered Ca2+ handling caused by mutant PS2 revealed in cultured cells is maintained in the more physiologically relevant in situ model. It needs also stressing that a reduction in IP3-mobilizable Ca2+ in slices from both tg mice is observed not only in neurons, but also in astrocytes. Since mutant APP is expressed only in neurons while PS2-N141I in both cell types, the fact that astrocytes show similarly altered Ca2+ dynamics in the double tg mice further suggests that the mutant PS2 is the only culprit. Last, but not least, the similarity (qualitatively and quantitatively) between Ca2+ dysregulation in the two tg mouse lines confirms that expression of mutant APP, per se, has no primary effect on the store Ca2+ content, at least at 2 weeks of age (Stieren et al., 2010). Taken together these findings point out to an ‘all or none’ effect of mutant PS2 that may be related to the amount of its possible interacting partners. In spite of the reduced store Ca2+ content, Ca2+ release induced by caffeine in cultured tg neurons was increased, a finding common not only to other AD mouse models based on different FAD-linked PS mutations (Chan et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2005), but also a possible biomarker of aging neurons (Thibault et al., 2007; Toescu & Vreugdenhil, 2010). Most likely this larger response to caffeine depends on the increased level of Ry-Rs in brains and cultured neurons from both tg mice, as compared to wt. Much to our surprise, no rapid Ca2+ mobilization could be triggered in slices by caffeine, when applied either as a puff or by perfusion. However, the drug was effective on Ry-Rs, as it induced a complete emptying of Ca2+ stores after a prolonged incubation, while blocking Ca2+ spikes with TTX. Taken together, these
data suggest that the penetration of caffeine inside the cells is too slow to rapidly reach a sufficiently high concentration capable of triggering fast Ca^{2+} mobilization via Ry-Rs, but it is enough to slowly and completely discharge the ER Ca^{2+} content. We have recently reported that over-expression of mutant PS2 increases the contact sites between ER and mitochondria in cell lines, as well as in primary rat cortical neurons (Zampese et al., 2011). From the functional point of view, this structural change is also responsible of an increased efficiency of Ca^{2+} uptake by mitochondria because of an increased number of Ca^{2+} microdomains (formed at the outer mitochondrial membrane upon ER Ca^{2+} release) (Zampese et al., 2011). ER–mitochondria contact sites were significantly increased also in tg neurons of primary cultures and brain slices, as compared to wt neurons. As to ER–mitochondria Ca^{2+} transfer, because of the strong reduction in the ER Ca^{2+} content in PS2-N141I neurons, the maximal nuclear (cytosolic) and mitochondrial increases were observed in the wt neurons. However, if one considers only wt and tg neurons with comparable nuclear (cytosolic) responses, the rise in mitochondrial Ca^{2+} was significantly larger in the latter cells.

An extensive body of literature suggests that Aβ peptides may affect Ca^{2+} homeostasis (Thinakaran & Sisodia, 2006). We here show that, in the brains of 2-week-old tg mice, the level of total Aβ42 and the Aβ42/Aβ40 ratio were rather low but yet substantially higher in the PS2APP mice. Given that the reduction in the store Ca^{2+} content, the increase in Ry-R expression and the augmented ER–mitochondria cross talk, are all very similar in the two tg lines, the simplest explanation is that Aβ42 and Aβ40 peptides do not play a major role in these processes. It may be argued that the Aβ increased observed in PS2 tg mice is sufficient to cause the Ca^{2+} alterations we observed and that the additional larger Aβ rise observed in the PS2APP mice has no additional effect. We believe that this possibility is unlikely, because qualitatively and quantitatively similar effects on Ca^{2+} stores and ER–mitochondria coupling were found in cell lines and neurons expressing the loss-of-function PS2-D366A (Brunner et al., 2009, Zampese et al., 2011). We cannot exclude, on the contrary, that the increase in Ca^{2+} spikes upon GABA-A receptor blockade is already maximal at the very low levels of Aβ42 found in single tg mice. Similarly, it is likely, [and actually important evidence has recently been obtained along these lines (Busche et al., 2012)], that toxic Aβ peptides, at the higher levels reached in older mice, will per se cause modifications in neuronal Ca^{2+} homeostasis. Altogether, our data are in agreement with the idea that increased neuronal Ca^{2+} excitability is a precocious event shared by both AD and brain aging (Gleichmann et al., 2012).

The final and most important question is whether the altered Ca^{2+} homeostasis – here revealed in neurons (and astrocytes) from tg mice bearing the PS2-N141I – has a role in the pathogenesis of the disease. Our data clearly demonstrate that the so-called ‘Ca^{2+} overload’ mechanism (La Ferla, 2002) is untenable in FAD caused by mutations in PS2. Along the same line, a thorough, very recent, study by Foskett and coworkers reveals that a number of PS1 mutations neither decrease nor augment ER Ca^{2+} levels (Shilling et al., 2012). In support of data previously obtained in cells and neurons over-expressing FAD-linked PS2 mutants, we here show, both in primary cultures and in situ, that neurons from tg mice carrying the PS2-N141I mutation have a lower ER Ca^{2+} content, but the number of contacts sites between mitochondria and ER is increased. In contrast, PS1 mutations do not cause a major change of ER Ca^{2+} levels and do not modify ER–mitochondria tethering (Zatti et al., 2006; Zampese et al., 2011; Shilling et al., 2012). Both FAD-PS1 and PS2 mutations increase the expression of Ry-Rs and the sensitivity of IP_{3}R to IP_{3} (Cheung et al., 2008). A revised version of the Ca^{2+} overload hypoth- esis that takes into consideration all the above data would rather point to an increased transfer of Ca^{2+} from the ER to the mitochondria as a causative event: with PS2 mutations, the increased IP_{3}R sensitivity and Ry-R number, coupled to a higher ER–mitochondria juxtaposition, may lead to a larger Ca^{2+} uptake through the mitochondrial Ca^{2+} uniporter, despite the reduced overall ER Ca^{2+} content. In the long run, this chronic over-transfer of Ca^{2+} to mitochondria may eventually lead to mitochondrial functional impairment and neuronal damage. In this context, the increased Ca^{2+} excitability of tg neurons, here revealed, may represent a further stressor. In the case of PS1 mutations, the ER Ca^{2+} level is unper- turbated (or possibly increased) and the ER–mitochondria tethering is normal, but the IP_{3}R sensitivity and the Ry-R number are both increased as in mutated PS2 models. In the end, in neurons bearing PS1 mutations, the effect on ER–mitochondria Ca^{2+} transfer may be similarly enhanced. In addition, the possibility should be considered that the Ca^{2+} handling alterations here reported may be more directly correlated with modifications in synaptic functions rather than to overt cell death. Indeed, mitochondrial Ca^{2+} dysregulation has been linked to altered synaptic plasticity in normal aging (Toescu & Verkhratsky, 2004) and, possibly, to the synaptic dysfunctions precociously observed in different AD mouse models. Noteworthy PS1 has recently been shown to influence dendritic spine plasticity in an in-vivo model, independently of its γ-secretase activity, but possibly linked to an effect on Ca^{2+} homeostasis (Jung et al., 2011).

Our proposed model takes into account findings by different laboratories and provides a rationale that accommodates divergent data into a unifying hypothesis centred on mitochondrial Ca^{2+} toxicity. How altered ER/mitochondria Ca^{2+} cross talk then modifies synaptic plasticity and causes early dysfunctions is a matter of intense study. Briefly, we can first cite altered mitochondria trafficking at the synaptic level and, consequently, reduced ATP supply and Ca^{2+} buffering capacity at the site of highest demand, all conditions which can be worsened by the increased excitability.

Obviously, the model proposed is clearly oversimplified as it does not consider other key pathogenic factors that are essential in AD, that is, Aβ load and plaques, hyperphosphorylated tau and astrogliosis. However, the fact that, in different AD mouse models, the presence of PS mutations accelerates the onset of neuronal dysfunctions and cognitive defects, reinforces the idea that subtle changes in Ca^{2+} handling, owing to PS mutants, render the neurons more vulnerable to other insults, such as Aβ oligomers, reactive oxygen species and excitotoxicity.

**Experimental procedures**

**Animal handling and care**

The transgenic mouse lines PS2.30H and B6.152H were kindly donated by Dr. L. Ozmen (F. Hoffmann-La Roche Ltd, Basel, Switzerland) (Richards et al., 2003; Ozmen et al., 2009; Rhein et al., 2009). Both lines have the background strain of C57BL/6 mice, which were used as wt controls and purchased from Charles River (Lecco, Italy). All procedures were carried out in strict adherence to the Italian regulations on animal protection and care and with the explicit approval of the local veterinary authority (CEASA Nr 56880).

**Primary neuronal cultures**

Primary neuronal cultures were obtained from cortices dissected from 0 to 1 day newborn mice as previously described (Zatti et al., 2006). Cells were seeded on poly-L-lysine (100 μg ml^{-1}) coated coverslips at a density of 300.000 cells cm^{-2} in MEM Gibco containing glucose (20 mM), L-glutamine (0.5 mM), N2 supplement (1%), B27 supplement (0.5%), biotin...
(3.6 μM), pyruvic acid (1 mM), penicillin (25 μg ml⁻¹), streptomycin (25 μg ml⁻¹), neomycin (50 μg ml⁻¹) and horse serum (10%). After 24 h plating, the complete MEM was replaced with serum and antibiotic free Neurobasal medium containing B27 (2%) and L-glutamine (2 mM), unless otherwise stated. Fresh medium was added (1/5 of total volume) every 4th day.

**Ca²⁺** measurements in primary neuronal cultures

Cytosolic and organelle (mitochondria, nuclear and ER) Ca²⁺ levels were monitored by different approaches (see Data S1).

**Data analysis**

Data were analyzed using Origin 7.5 SR6 (OriginLab Corporation, Northampton, MA, USA) and Microsoft Excel 2003 (Microsoft Corporation, Redmond, WA, USA). Traces are averages of 40–60 cells and are representative of 20–40 independent experiments. Values are expressed as mean ± SEM (n = number of independent experiments). Statistical significance was evaluated by unpaired two-tailed Student’s t-test. Analysis of the differences between categories was carried out by one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey’s HSD (Honestly Significantly Different) multiple comparison tests with a confidence interval of 95%, **P < 0.05, ***P < 0.01, ****P < 0.001.

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**Conflict of interest**

None.

**Author contributions**

P.P., C.F and T.P designed the experiments and wrote the manuscript. M.J.K. and L.C. helped in writing the manuscript and performed the experiments with neuronal cultures and brain slices, respectively. E.Z., C.L. and A.W. performed the experiments with the recombinant probes. The biochemical and histochemical analyses of mouse brains and cultures were carried out respectively by L.C. and C.L.

**References**


