

Tetramethylenedisulfotetramine Alters Ca²⁺ Dynamics in Cultured Hippocampal Neurons: Mitigation by NMDA Receptor Blockade and GABA_A Receptor-Positive Modulation

Zhengyu Cao,* Bruce D. Hammock,† Mark McCoy,† Michael A. Rogawski,‡ Pamela J. Lein,* and Isaac N. Pessah*¹

*Department of Molecular Biosciences, School of Veterinary Medicine and †Department of Entomology, College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, University of California, Davis, California 95616; and ‡Department of Neurology, School of Medicine, University of California, Sacramento, California 95817

¹To whom correspondence should be addressed at Department of Molecular Biosciences, School of Veterinary Medicine, University of California, One Shields Avenue, Davis, CA 95616. Fax: (530) 752-4698. E-mail: inpessah@ucdavis.edu.

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Tetramethylenedisulfotetramine (TETS) is a potent convulsant that is considered a chemical threat agent. We characterized TETS as an activator of spontaneous Ca²⁺ oscillations and electrical burst discharges in mouse hippocampal neuronal cultures at 13–17 days *in vitro* using FLIPR Fluo-4 fluorescence measurements and extracellular microelectrode array recording. Acute exposure to TETS (≥ 2 μM) reversibly altered the pattern of spontaneous neuronal discharges, producing clustered burst firing and an overall increase in discharge frequency. TETS also dramatically affected Ca²⁺ dynamics causing an immediate but transient elevation of neuronal intracellular Ca²⁺ followed by decreased frequency of Ca²⁺ oscillations but greater peak amplitude. The effect on Ca²⁺ dynamics was similar to that elicited by picrotoxin and bicuculline, supporting the view that TETS acts by inhibiting type A gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA_A) receptor function. The effect of TETS on Ca²⁺ dynamics requires activation of N-methyl-D-aspartic acid (NMDA) receptors, because the changes induced by TETS were prevented by MK-801 block of NMDA receptors, but not nifedipine block of L-type Ca²⁺ channels. Pretreatment with the GABA_A receptor-positive modulators diazepam and allopregnanolone partially mitigated TETS-induced changes in Ca²⁺ dynamics. Moreover, low, minimally effective concentrations of diazepam (0.1 μM) and allopregnanolone (0.1 μM), when administered together, were highly effective in suppressing TETS-induced alterations in Ca²⁺ dynamics, suggesting that the combination of positive modulators of synaptic and extrasynaptic GABA_A receptors may have therapeutic potential. These rapid throughput *in vitro* assays may assist in the identification of single agents or combinations that have utility in the treatment of TETS intoxication.

Key Words: Ca²⁺ oscillations; GABA_A receptors; microelectrode array; NMDA receptors; rapid throughput assay; tetramethylenedisulfotetramine.

Tetramethylenedisulfotetramine (TETS), commonly called tetramine, is a highly toxic convulsant with a parenteral LD₅₀ of 0.1–0.3 mg/kg in mice or rats (Casida *et al.*, 1976; Haskell

and Voss, 1957; Voss *et al.*, 1961). In adult humans, 7–10 mg is estimated as a lethal dose (Guan *et al.*, 1993). TETS was used as a rodenticide until banned worldwide in the early 1990s (Banks *et al.*, 2012; Whitlow *et al.*, 2005). It is, however, still available illegally, and is responsible for accidental and intentional poisonings, predominantly in China (Croddy, 2004; Wu and Sun, 2004; Zhang *et al.*, 2011), but also in other countries, including the United States (Barrueto *et al.*, 2003). Between 1991 and 2010 over 14,000 cases of TETS intoxication were reported in China with 932 deaths (Li *et al.*, 2012). Extreme toxicity, history of intentional mass poisonings, and the absence of a specific antidote raise concern that TETS is a potential chemical threat agent that could cause mass casualties if released accidentally or intentionally (Jett and Yeung, 2010; Whitlow *et al.*, 2005).

Mild-to-moderate poisoning with TETS leads to headache and dizziness, whereas severe intoxication produces status epilepticus and coma (Li *et al.*, 2012; Whitlow *et al.*, 2005). Animal studies demonstrate that TETS is active as a convulsant when administered orally, parenterally, and intraventricularly (Zolkowska *et al.*, 2012). Sublethal seizures are not associated with evidence of cellular injury or neurodegeneration although there is delayed transient reactive astrocytosis and microglial activation (Zolkowska *et al.*, 2012).

The primary convulsant mechanism of TETS has been thought to relate to blockade of type A gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA_A) receptors and the seizures induced in animals resemble those produced by other GABA_A receptor antagonists including picrotoxin and pentylenetetrazol. Limited cellular physiological studies and results from [³⁵S]-butylbicyclophosphorothionate binding to brain membranes indicate that TETS inhibits GABA_A receptors with an IC₅₀ in the range of 1 μM (Esser *et al.*, 1991; Ratra *et al.*, 2001; Squires *et al.*, 1983) and it is therefore comparable in potency to picrotoxin as an inhibitor of GABA_A receptors (Cole and Casida, 1986; Ratra *et al.*, 2001; Squires *et al.*, 1983).

Cultured hippocampal neurons display spontaneous synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillations (Tanaka *et al.*, 1996) that are driven by action potential-dependent synaptic transmission. Chemically diverse environmental toxicants have been reported to disrupt neuronal Ca²⁺ oscillations (Cao *et al.*, 2010, 2011; Choi *et al.*, 2010; Pereira *et al.*, 2010; Soria-Mercado *et al.*, 2009). Convulsant agents can also dramatically influence neuronal Ca²⁺. For example, the organophosphate diisopropylfluorophosphate produces long-lasting Ca²⁺ elevations in hippocampal neurons (Deshpande *et al.*, 2010).

Hippocampal neurons also exhibit spontaneous electrical discharges as they form functional neuronal networks. These discharges, as detected in extracellular recordings, consist of infrequent synchronized field potentials, mixed with more frequent desynchronized random action potentials (Cao *et al.*, 2012; Frega *et al.*, 2012). Synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillations and neuronal electrical firing co-occur (Jimbo *et al.*, 1993) and are important in mediating neuronal development and activity-dependent dendritic growth (Wayman *et al.*, 2008). Genetic or environmental factors that interfere with neurotransmission influence the overall activity of neuronal networks (Frega *et al.*, 2012; Kenet *et al.*, 2007; Meyer *et al.*, 2008; Shafer *et al.*, 2008; Wayman *et al.*, 2012). For example, picrotoxin, a GABA_A receptor antagonist, produces striking changes in network electrical activity (Cao *et al.*, 2012; Frega *et al.*, 2012).

In this study, we used rapid throughput assays to characterize the influence of TETS on Ca²⁺ dynamics and electrical discharges in cultured hippocampal neurons. Inasmuch as TETS induces changes in Ca²⁺ dynamics that are similar to those produced by the GABA_A receptor antagonists picrotoxin and bicuculline, our results support the view that TETS acts as a GABA_A receptor antagonist. Using rapid throughput Ca²⁺ measurement, we demonstrate that the GABA_A receptor-positive modulators diazepam and allopregnanolone reduce or prevent TETS effects on Ca²⁺ dynamics, suggesting these agents as potential treatment strategies for TETS-induced seizures.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials. Fetal bovine serum and soybean trypsin inhibitor were obtained from Atlanta Biologicals (Norcross, GA). DNase, poly-L-lysine, cytosine arabinoside, (+)-5-methyl-10,11-dihydro-5H-dibenzo[*a,d*]cyclohepten-5,10-imine maleate (MK-801), hydroxypropyl-β-cyclodextran, and 3,5-dimethyl 2,6-dimethyl-4-(2-nitrophenyl)-1,4-dihydropyridine-3,5-dicarboxylate (nifedipine) were from Sigma-Aldrich (St Louis, MO). The Ca²⁺ fluorescence dye Fluo-4, Pluronic F-127, and Neurobasal medium were purchased from Life Technology (Grand Island, NY). Tetramethylenedisulfotetramine (TETS) was synthesized as described previously (Zolkowska *et al.*, 2012). Diazepam was from Western Medical Supply (Arcadia, CA). Allopregnanolone (3α-hydroxy-5α-pregnan-20-one) was custom synthesized and characterized as > 99% pure.

Primary cultures of hippocampal neurons. Animals were treated humanely and with regard for alleviation of suffering according to protocols approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee of the University of California, Davis. Hippocampal neuron cultures were dissociated from hippocampi dissected from C57Bl/6J mouse pups at postnatal day 0–1 and maintained in Neurobasal complete medium (Neurobasal medium supplemented with

NS21, 0.5mM L-glutamine, and 4-(2-hydroxyethyl)-1-piperazineethanesulfonic acid [HEPES]) with 5% fetal bovine serum. For Ca²⁺ imaging studies using FLIPR, dissociated hippocampal cells were plated onto poly-L-lysine-coated clear-bottom, black wall, 96-well imaging plate (BD, Franklin Lakes, NJ) at a density of 0.8 × 10⁵/well. For microelectrode array (MEA) experiments, 120 μl of cell suspension at a density of 1.5 × 10⁶ cells/ml were added to a 12-well Maestro plate (Axion BioSystems, Atlanta, GA). After 2 h incubation, a volume of 1.0 ml of serum-free Neurobasal complete medium was added to each well. The medium was changed twice a week by replacing half the volume of culture medium in the well with serum-free Neurobasal complete medium. The neurons were maintained at 37°C with 5% CO₂ and 95% humidity.

Measurement of synchronous intracellular Ca²⁺ oscillations. Hippocampal neurons between 13 and 17 days *in vitro* (DIV) were used to investigate how TETS alters synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillations that normally occur in healthy neurons at this developmental stage. This method permits simultaneous measurements of intracellular Ca²⁺ transients in all wells of a 96-well plate as described previously (Cao *et al.*, 2010). Baseline recordings were acquired in Locke's buffer (8.6mM HEPES, 5.6mM KCl, 154mM NaCl, 5.6mM glucose, 1.0mM MgCl₂, 2.3mM CaCl₂, and 0.0001mM glycine, pH 7.4) for 10 min followed by addition of TETS and/or pharmacological agents using a programmable 96-channel pipetting robotic system, and the intracellular Ca²⁺ concentration ([Ca²⁺]_i) was monitored for an additional 30 min. Unless otherwise indicated, pharmacological interventions were introduced 10 min prior to TETS. TETS triggered an immediate rise in [Ca²⁺]_i that was quantified by determining the area under the curve (AUC) of the Fluo-4 arbitrary fluorescence units for a duration of 5 min following TETS addition. TETS also altered the frequency and amplitude of neuronal synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillations, which were analyzed during the 10-min period after addition of TETS for 15 min.

MEA recording. All MEA recordings were conducted on 13–17 DIV hippocampal neuronal networks at 37°C in culture medium without perfusion using a 12-well Maestro system (Axion). Each well contains 64 electrodes (30 μm diameter) in an 8 × 8 grid with interelectrode spacing of 200 μm. Before recording basal electrical activity, the cultures were equilibrated in freshly prepared, prewarmed Neurobasal complete medium for 1 h. The 12-well Maestro plates were loaded onto a temperature-regulated headstage containing the recording amplifier, and raw extracellular electrical signals were acquired using Axis software (Axion BioSystems, Atlanta, GA). Signals from the amplifier were digitized at a rate of 25 kHz and filtered using Butterworth Band-pass filter (cutoff frequency of 300 Hz). The Axis software was used to detect spontaneous events that exceeded a threshold of six times the noise. Raster plot and spike rate analysis were performed by exporting the raw data to the NeuroExplorer software (version 4.0, NEX Technologies, Littleton, MA).

Data analysis. Graphing and statistical analysis were performed using GraphPad Prism software (Version 5.0, GraphPad Software Inc., San Diego, CA). EC₅₀ values were determined by non-linear regression using a three-parameter logistic equation. Statistical significance between different groups was calculated using Student's *t*-test or by an ANOVA and, where appropriate, a Dunnett's multiple comparison test; *p* values below 0.05 were considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Effects of TETS on Ca²⁺ Oscillations in Primary Cultured Hippocampal Neurons

Cultured hippocampal neurons (13–17 DIV) exhibit spontaneous synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillations whose frequency and amplitude can be quantitatively assessed in real time using FLIPR (Fig. 1A). Addition of vehicle (0.01% dimethyl sulfoxide [DMSO]) had no significant effect on the properties of the synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillations during the 5-min phase I period or the 10-min phase II period (Fig. 1A, top trace). By contrast,

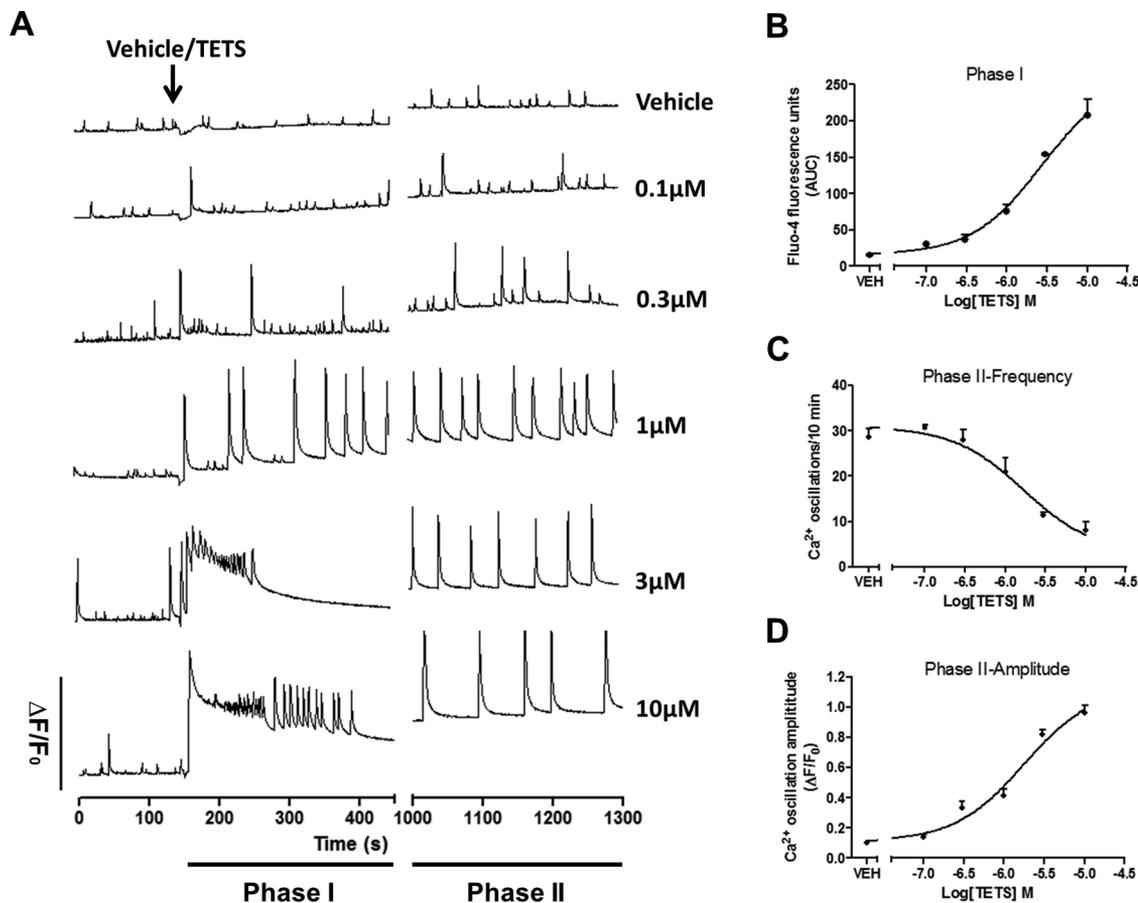


FIG. 1. TETS-induced Ca²⁺ dysregulation in hippocampal neurons. (A) Representative traces showing how acute exposure to TETS (0.1–10 μM) influences Ca²⁺ fluctuations in hippocampal neurons 13–17 DIV. Note that neurons exhibit spontaneous synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillations at this developmental stage indicative of functional network connectivity. The effects of TETS were analyzed in the initial 5 min following addition (phase I) and in the subsequent 10 min (phase II). In phase I, the integrated intracellular Ca²⁺ level increased in a concentration-dependent fashion (B), and there was a plateau response at higher concentrations (3 and 10 μM) that decayed slowly over the 5 min period. In phase II, there was a concentration-dependent reduction in the frequency (C) and an increase in the amplitude of the spontaneous synchronized Ca²⁺ oscillations (D). The traces shown for phase II are representative samples of the 10-min phase II period. This experiment was repeated three times with similar results.

exposure of the neurons to TETS caused an immediate increase in the amplitude of the Ca²⁺ oscillations, and at higher concentrations (3 and 10 μM), a sustained plateau response that decayed slowly over the 5-min phase I period. The integrated Ca²⁺ signal (AUC) during the phase I period exhibited a concentration-dependent increase, with an EC₅₀ value of 2.7 μM (95% confidence interval [95% CI]: 1.4–5.2 μM) (Fig. 1B). During phase II, TETS caused a concentration-dependent decrease in the frequency of the synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillations with an EC₅₀ value of 1.7 μM (95% CI: 0.69–4.12 μM; Fig. 1C). Along with the reduction in the frequency, TETS increased the mean Ca²⁺ oscillation amplitude with an EC₅₀ value of 1.8 μM (95% CI: 1.12–2.80 μM; Fig. 1D). TETS modestly prolonged the mean duration of individual Ca²⁺ transients compared with that measured from vehicle-exposed control neurons (data not shown). TETS-induced phase II Ca²⁺ responses (both frequency and amplitude) were reversible upon washout of TETS (Supplementary fig. 1).

For comparison, we studied the influence on Ca²⁺ dynamics in cultured hippocampal neurons of picrotoxin (PTX; 100 μM), a noncompetitive blocker of GABA_A receptors, and bicuculline (100 μM), a competitive antagonist of GABA_A receptors. Both antagonists elicited phase I and phase II responses that were similar to those induced by TETS (Fig. 2).

TETS Enhances Neuronal Electric Network Activity in Primary Cultured Hippocampal Neurons

Extracellular recordings of electrical activity from multiple sites within the neuronal cultures at a high spatial resolution provide a robust measure of network activity and connectivity (Johnstone *et al.*, 2010). After recording the basal electrical activity for 10 min, increasing concentrations of TETS were serially introduced into the wells. A 10-min recording was collected at each TETS concentration. A control well was simultaneously recorded following introduction of vehicle (0.01–0.1% DMSO). Basal recordings for up to 60 min showed that network

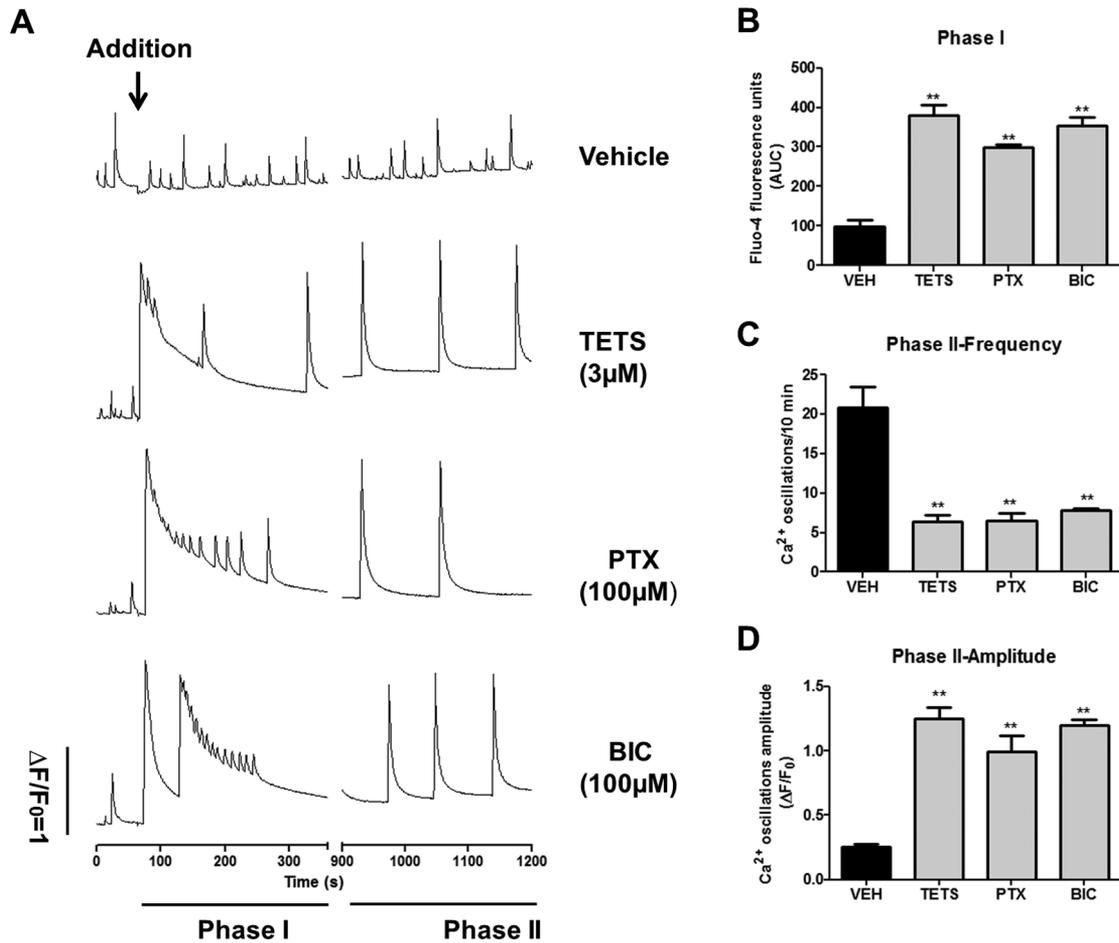


FIG. 2. TETS, picrotoxin, and bicuculline trigger similar neuronal Ca²⁺ dysregulation. (A) Representative traces from experiments comparing the effects of TETS (3 μ M), picrotoxin (100 μ M), and bicuculline (100 μ M) on Ca²⁺ fluctuations. The three agents produce similar acute elevation of the integrated Ca²⁺ level (B) with plateau responses in phase I, and they decreased the oscillatory frequency (C), whereas increasing the amplitude of Ca²⁺ transients in phase II (D). ** $p < 0.01$, inhibitors vs. control, data were pooled from three experiments performed at least in duplicate.

firing activity was stable in the absence or presence of vehicle (Fig. 3A, left panel). Exposure to TETS concentrations of 2 μ M and greater produced a dramatic change in discharge pattern. Events became more highly clustered (Fig. 3A, right panel and Supplementary fig. 2) and the duration of clustered bursts induced by 6 μ M TETS lasted up to 10 s (Fig. 3A, right panel, fourth row). There was also an overall increase in the discharge rate (Fig. 3B). After washout of TETS, the neuronal network firing recovered to basal conditions.

N-Methyl-D-Aspartic Acid Receptors, but Not L-type Ca²⁺ Channels Are Required for TETS-Induced Ca²⁺ Dysregulation

We next examined the possible involvement of N-methyl-D-aspartic acid (NMDA) receptors and L-type Ca²⁺ channels in the effects of TETS on Ca²⁺ dynamics. Preincubation of neuronal cultures for 10 min with MK-801 (1 μ M), an NMDA receptor blocker, attenuated both phase I and phase II effects of TETS (Figs. 4A–D). MK-801 slightly suppressed basal Ca²⁺

oscillations, which is consistent with an earlier report (Tanaka *et al.*, 1996). By contrast, nifedipine (1 μ M), which inhibits L-type voltage-activated Ca²⁺ channels, was without effect on TETS-induced phase I or phase II Ca²⁺ responses (Figs. 4A–D). These results indicate that NMDA receptors but not L-type Ca²⁺ channels are required for the effects of TETS on Ca²⁺ dynamics.

Diazepam and Allopregnanolone Partially Mitigate TETS-Induced Ca²⁺ Dysregulation

We next determined whether the GABA_A receptor-positive modulators diazepam and allopregnanolone could protect against TETS-induced Ca²⁺ dysregulation. Figure 5A (top trace) demonstrates that the oscillatory activity of neurons exposed to vehicle remained stable over the entire recording period. Introduction of diazepam (0.1, 0.3, or 1 μ M) attenuated the amplitude of basal spontaneous Ca²⁺ oscillations (Fig. 5A). Pre-exposure to diazepam caused a small concentration-dependent reduction of the phase I integrated rise in [Ca²⁺]_i induced by TETS that reached statistical significance only at

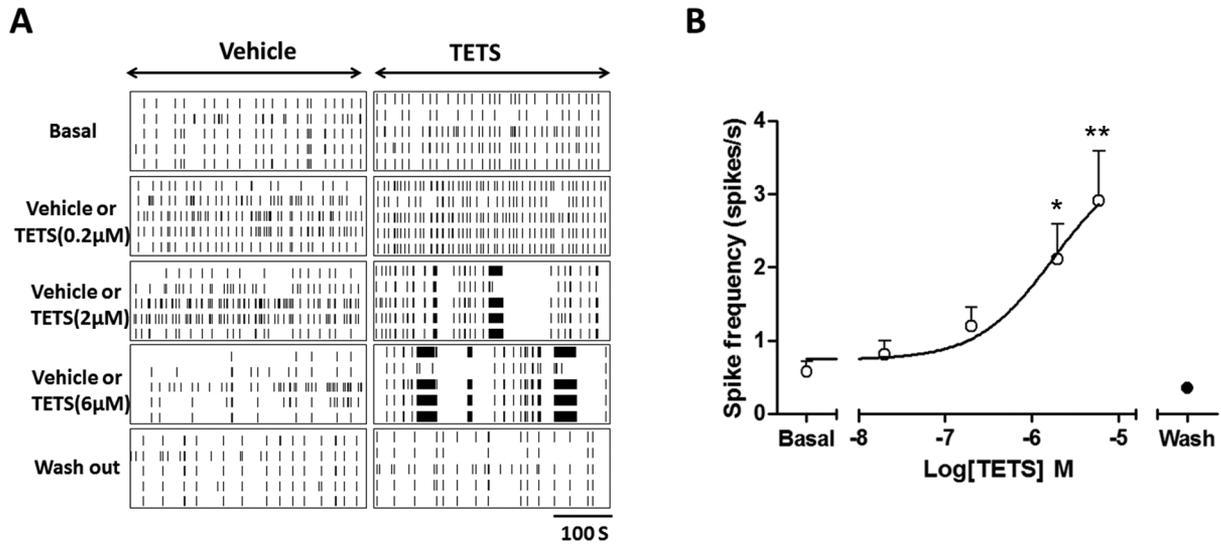


FIG. 3. TETS reversibly alters spontaneous electrical discharges in hippocampal neurons. (A) Representative raster plots of neuronal discharges before, during, and after exposure to vehicle (DMSO) (left panels) or TETS (right panels). Neuronal network activity was stable for up to 60 min in the absence or presence of vehicle. TETS solutions of increasing concentration were added serially to the wells. After recording for 10 min, the solution was removed and replaced by a higher concentration or by vehicle (wash out). TETS concentrations of 2 and 6 μ M caused a clustered burst discharge pattern and increased the overall discharge frequency (B). This experiment was repeated three times with each treatment performed in duplicate with similar results. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, TETS vs. basal.

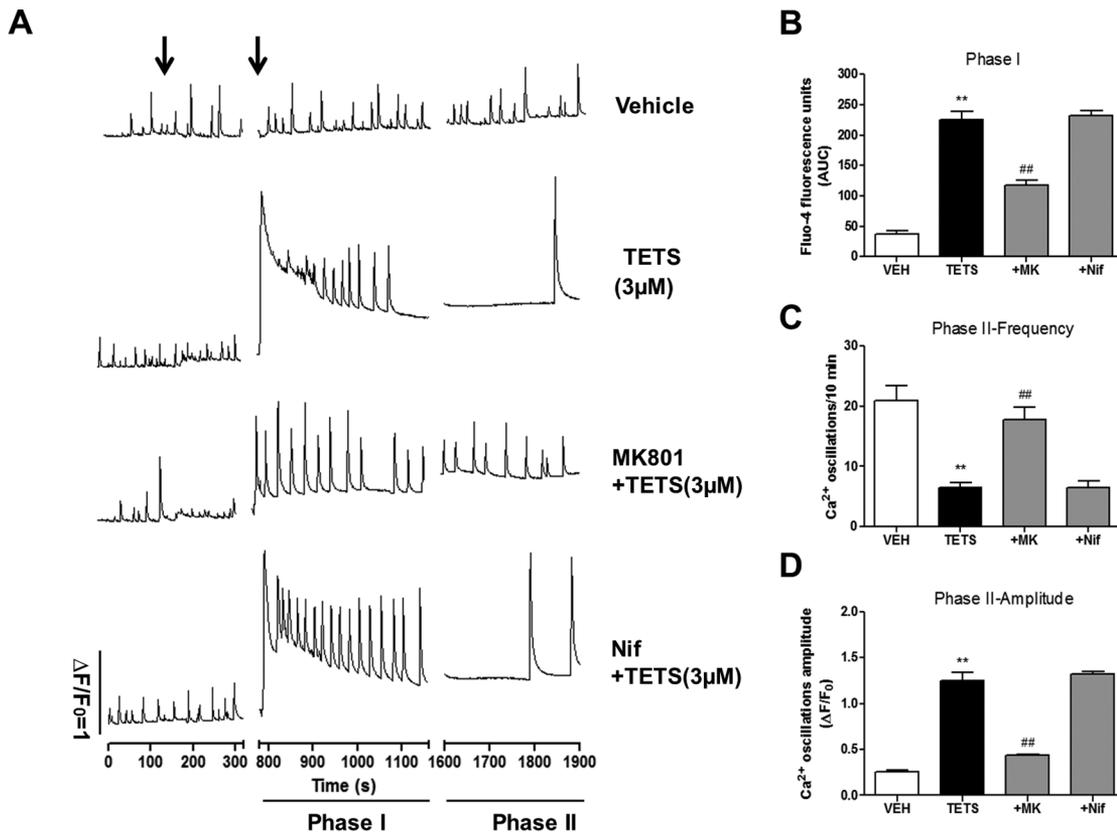


FIG. 4. MK-801, but not nifedipine, partially mitigates TETS (3 μ M)-induced neuronal Ca²⁺ dysregulation. (A) Representative traces illustrating effects of pre-exposure to MK-801 and nifedipine on TETS-induced Ca²⁺ dysregulation. Effects of MK-801 (MK) and nifedipine (NIF) on TETS-induced increase in integrated Ca²⁺ levels in phase I (B), the decrease in synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillation frequency in phase II (C), and the increase in Ca²⁺ transient amplitude in phase II (D). ** $p < 0.01$, TETS vs. vehicle control, ### $p < 0.01$, MK-801 + TETS vs. TETS, $n = 6$ pooled from two experiments.

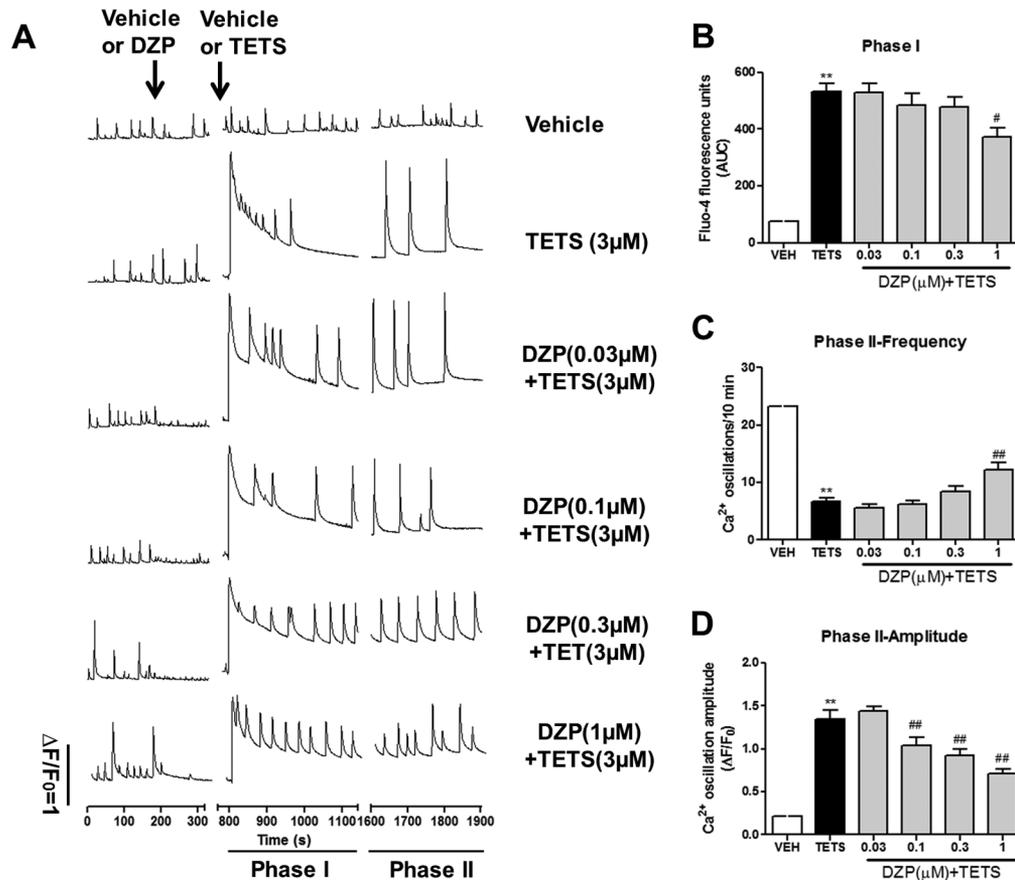


FIG. 5. Diazepam partially mitigates TETS-induced neuronal Ca²⁺ dysregulation. (A) Representative traces illustrating effects of pre-exposure to increasing concentrations of diazepam (0.03–1µM) on TETS-induced Ca²⁺ dysregulation. Effect of diazepam (DZP) on TETS-induced increase in integrated Ca²⁺ levels in phase I (B), the decrease in synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillation frequency in phase II (C), and the increase in Ca²⁺ transient amplitude in phase II (D). ***p* < 0.01, TETS vs. vehicle control, #*p* < 0.05, ##*p* < 0.01, diazepam + TETS vs. TETS, *n* = 6 pooled from two experiments.

1µM (Fig. 5B). Diazepam did not eliminate the phase I plateau response (Fig. 5A). Diazepam also caused a partial inhibition of the phase II frequency and amplitude effects of TETS, with the effect on amplitude reaching significance at 0.1µM (Figs. 5C and D).

As shown in Figure 6, allopregnanolone similarly attenuated the effects of TETS on Ca²⁺ dysregulation. Allopregnanolone (0.1–1µM) caused a concentration-dependent suppression of basal spontaneous Ca²⁺ fluctuations and it partially attenuated the response in phase I at 1µM without eliminating the plateau in Ca²⁺ levels (Figs. 6A and B). Allopregnanolone at 0.3 and 1µM also inhibited the phase II effect of TETS on the frequency and amplitude of Ca²⁺ oscillations, completely reversing phase II effects on transient amplitudes at 1µM (Figs. 6C and D).

Low Concentrations of Diazepam and Allopregnanolone in Combination Mitigate TETS-Induced Ca²⁺ Dysregulation

We next evaluated the effect of a combination of diazepam and allopregnanolone, each at a low concentration (0.1µM) that by itself had minimal effects on phase I or phase II Ca²⁺ dysregulation. As shown in Figure 7, the combination strongly

mitigated both phase I and phase II effects. In fact, the combination treatment was able to largely eliminate the plateau response obtained with acute TETS exposure (Fig. 7A), an effect not obtained with 10-fold higher concentrations of diazepam (Fig. 5) or allopregnanolone (Fig. 6) alone.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we characterized the effects of TETS on hippocampal neurons in culture using MEA field potential recording and Fluo-4 fluorescence measurements of Ca²⁺ dynamics in the neuronal network. Over time, hippocampal neurons in culture develop a rich network of processes and form numerous functional synaptic contacts (Arnold *et al.*, 2005; Mennerick *et al.*, 1995). Cultures that have developed for 13–17 DIV as used in this study are well organized and there is robust spontaneous electrical activity mediated by excitatory and inhibitory transmission between neurons. Neurons within such cultures exhibit spontaneous action potentials and cultures of sufficient cell density may show synchronized bursting of neurons throughout the entire culture (Arnold *et al.*, 2005).

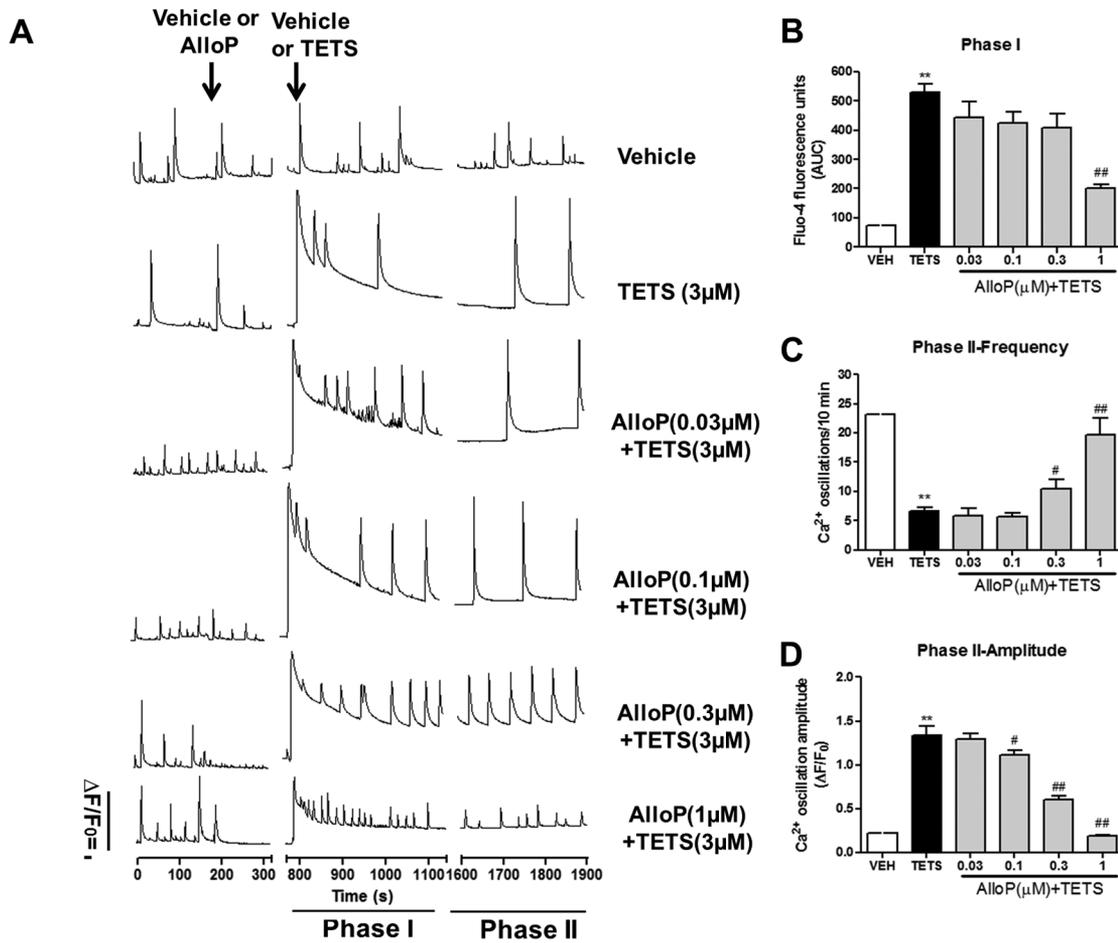


FIG. 6. Allopregnanolone partially mitigates TETS-induced neuronal Ca²⁺ signaling dysregulation. (A) Representative traces illustrating effects of pre-exposure to increasing concentrations of allopregnanolone (0.03–1 μM) on TETS-induced Ca²⁺ dysregulation. Effect of allopregnanolone (AlloP) on TETS-induced increase in integrated Ca²⁺ levels in phase I (B), the decrease in synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillation frequency in phase II (C), and the increase in Ca²⁺ transient amplitude in phase II (D). ***p* < 0.01, TETS vs. vehicle control, #*p* < 0.05, ##*p* < 0.01, allopregnanolone + TETS vs. TETS, *n* = 6 pooled from two experiments.

Excitatory synaptic transmission is mediated by functional glutamate receptors of the NMDA and AMPA types (Abele *et al.*, 1990). Importantly, the cultures contain GABAergic neurons, which comprise ~10% of the neuronal cell population. These GABAergic neurons form robust inhibitory synaptic connections mediated by GABA_A receptors that exhibit physiological properties similar to those in intact preparations (Jensen *et al.*, 1999, 2000). The GABAergic neurons impose tonic inhibition onto the network so that exposure of hippocampal cultures to GABA_A receptor antagonists causes increased action potential firing, spontaneous rhythmic neuronal depolarizations, and bursting. The rhythmic depolarizations and bursting are dependent upon action potentials as they are eliminated by tetrodotoxin.

MEA recording allows the electrical activity of multiple neurons within the culture to be monitored, whereas FLIPR Fluo-4 fluorescence measurements provide a dynamic assessment of aggregate intracellular Ca²⁺ levels (Cao *et al.*, 2010, 2012). Using these assays, we found that TETS dramatically

increases intracellular Ca²⁺ levels and alters Ca²⁺ dynamics, initially causing a transient increase in the [Ca²⁺]_i followed by a decrease in the frequency of synchronized Ca²⁺ oscillations but bigger transient amplitudes. MEA recordings of ongoing electric activity in the cultures showed an overall increase in discharge frequency and a change in the pattern of these discharges to a more clustered pattern interspersed by periods of electrical silence. The actions of TETS on neuronal Ca²⁺ dynamics and electrical discharge activity occur within the same concentration range, suggesting the two effects are mechanistically linked. The magnitude of the effects produced by TETS increase in a concentration-dependent manner with EC₅₀ values of ~1–2 μM; TETS inhibits GABA_A receptor responses in other preparations at similar concentrations (Bowery *et al.*, 1975; Dray, 1975; Roberts *et al.*, 1981). Moreover, TETS-induced changes in Ca²⁺ dynamics and electrical discharges resemble those induced by the GABA_A receptor antagonists bicuculline and picrotoxin (Arnold *et al.*, 2005; Cao *et al.*, 2012). Collectively, these observations support the view that the

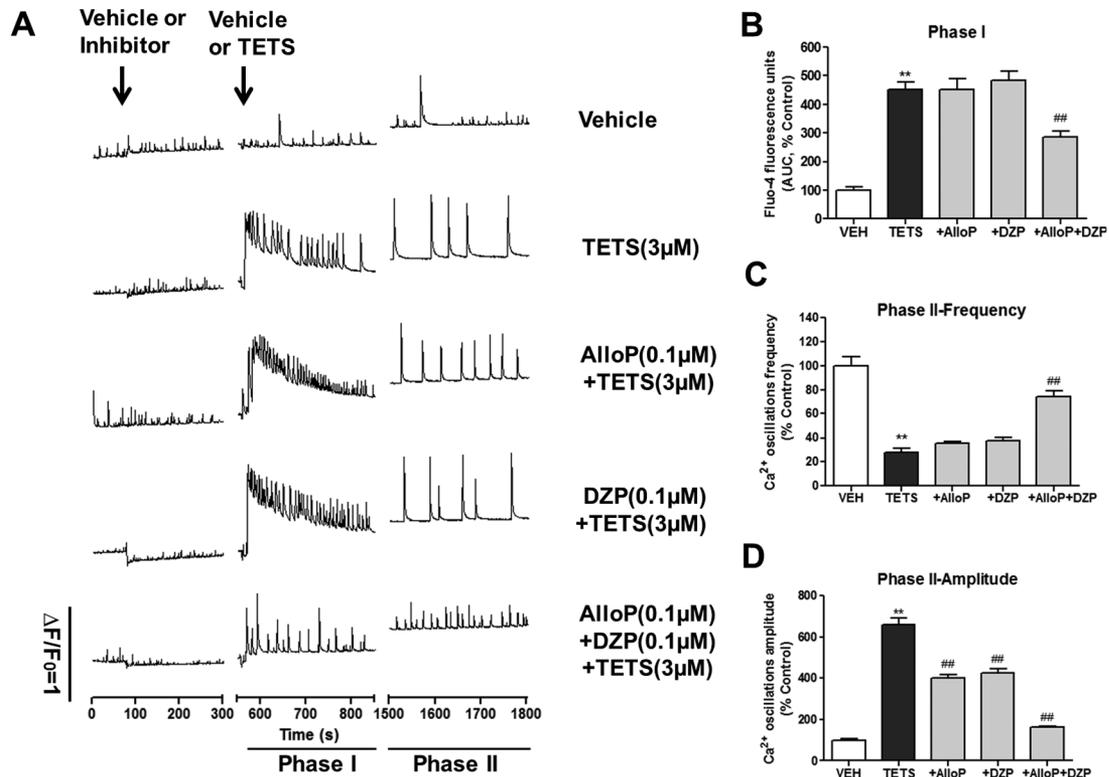


FIG. 7. Low concentrations of allopregnanolone and diazepam in combination act synergistically to mitigate TETS-induced neuronal Ca²⁺ signaling dysregulation. (A) Representative traces illustrating effect of pre-exposure to allopregnanolone (0.1 μ M), diazepam (0.1 μ M) or a combination of allopregnanolone (0.1 μ M) and diazepam (0.1 μ M) on TETS-induced Ca²⁺ dysregulation. Effects of allopregnanolone or diazepam alone or the combination on TETS-induced initial rise in [Ca²⁺]_i in phase I (B), the decrease in synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillation frequency in phase II (C), and the increase in Ca²⁺ transient amplitude in phase II (D). ** $p < 0.01$, TETS vs. vehicle control, ## $p < 0.01$, allopregnanolone/diazepam + TETS vs. TETS, $n = 8$ pooled from two experiments.

GABA_A receptor-blocking activity of TETS is responsible for the effects on Ca²⁺ dynamics and electrical activity. Like picrotoxin, TETS is believed to be a reversible inhibitor of GABA_A receptors, which is also consistent with the rapid reversibility of its effects on burst discharges and Ca²⁺ dynamics.

TETS-triggered alterations in electrical firing and synchronous Ca²⁺ oscillations appear to rely on spontaneous action potentials because they are prevented by tetrodotoxin block of Na⁺ channels (data not shown). The neuronal specificity of TETS in producing both phase I and phase II Ca²⁺ responses in hippocampal cultures is indicated by the observations that addition of TETS at concentrations of up to 3 μ M to the culture medium of skeletal myotubes alters neither basal Ca²⁺ levels nor electrically evoked Ca²⁺ transients (data not shown).

A key observation in this study is that the alterations in Ca²⁺ dynamics induced by TETS were largely inhibited by MK-801 demonstrating that NMDA receptors are required. The effect of TETS is unlikely to be due to direct activation of NMDA receptors inasmuch as bath application of NMDA, which directly activates NMDA receptors, fails to induce clustered burst discharges as observed with TETS and other GABA_A receptor antagonists, although it does increase the overall discharge frequency (Cao *et al.*, 2012). The NMDA receptor dependence

for TETS-triggered Ca²⁺ responses is consistent with earlier *in vivo* reports that the NMDA receptor antagonist MK-801 inhibits picrotoxin or bicuculline-induced convulsion in mice (Czlonkowska *et al.*, 2000; Obara, 1995). Moreover, *ex vivo* studies have demonstrated that the NMDA antagonist 2-APV suppresses picrotoxin-induced Ca²⁺ responses as well as the frequency and duration of the epileptiform discharges in the hippocampal slice preparation (Kohr and Heinemann, 1989). How NMDA receptor antagonists inhibit responses to GABA_A receptor blockade remains to be determined. One possibility is that GABA antagonists cause enhanced synaptic glutamate release, leading to activation of synaptic NMDA receptors. The phase I Ca²⁺ response may therefore in part be generated by Ca²⁺ entry through these NMDA receptors. In support of this possibility, bicuculline-induced Ca²⁺ responses have been shown to involve synaptic but not extrasynaptic NMDA receptor activation (Hardingham *et al.*, 2001, 2002).

Consistent with the role of GABA_A receptors in restraining bursting and altered Ca²⁺ dynamics is our observation that the GABA_A receptor-positive modulators diazepam and allopregnanolone are able to protect against the effects of TETS on Ca²⁺ dynamics. Allopregnanolone was more effective in mitigating the phase I response induced by TETS than by

diazepam. It is well recognized that benzodiazepines such as diazepam only act on synaptic GABA_A receptors, whereas neurosteroids such as allopregnanolone preferentially enhance extrasynaptic GABA_A receptors although they act on synaptic receptors as well (Kokate *et al.*, 1994; Lambert *et al.*, 2003; Reddy and Rogawski, 2012). Therefore, the enhanced efficacy of allopregnanolone may be due to its additional action on extrasynaptic receptors. In addition, at higher concentrations, allopregnanolone is able to directly activate GABA_A receptors in the absence of GABA, whereas benzodiazepines require the presence of GABA. Therefore, there are important pharmacological differences in the action of neurosteroids and benzodiazepines at GABA_A receptors that could account for the enhanced activity of allopregnanolone. However, neither diazepam nor allopregnanolone alone was fully effective, even at the highest concentrations tested (1 μM). Unexpectedly, we found that the combination of diazepam and allopregnanolone, each at a threshold concentration of 0.1 μM, was highly effective at protecting against the effects of TETS on Ca²⁺ dynamics, causing a nearly complete inhibition of the phase I response, including the plateau in Ca²⁺, as well as the phase II changes. The combination of a benzodiazepine and a neurosteroid has not to our knowledge previously been studied in a simplified functional system. However, there is evidence from behavioral studies that neurosteroids can potentiate the actions of benzodiazepines (Gerak *et al.*, 2004; Molina-Hernandez *et al.*, 2003). The mechanism underlying the synergistic effect is not known. It is conceivable that the combined action on synaptic and extrasynaptic receptors accounts for the unique potency of the drug combination.

An alternative explanation of the synergism hypothesizes an interaction at the level of individual GABA_A receptors. The recognition sites for neurosteroids on GABA_A receptors are distinct from those that recognize benzodiazepines and barbiturates (Johnston, 1996). It is conceivable, however, that allopregnanolone and diazepam could produce a synergistic enhancement of GABA_A receptors in a similar fashion as the synergism that occurs between barbiturates and benzodiazepines, where there is known to be allosteric coupling (DeLorey *et al.*, 1993). Whether the *in vitro* synergism between diazepam and allopregnanolone observed in measurements of Ca²⁺ dynamics predicts efficacy of the combination in protecting against seizures induced by TETS or caused by other factors remains to be tested.

In summary, we have developed rapid throughput methods to detect TETS-induced Ca²⁺ dysregulation and altered electrical activity in cultured hippocampal neurons. We demonstrated that two GABA_A receptors allosteric modulators, allopregnanolone and diazepam, when introduced either singly or in combination prior to TETS, mitigate TETS-induced Ca²⁺ dysregulation, suggesting that the *in vitro* methods described here have translational value to identify new therapies and optimize combinatorial strategies for the prevention of TETS poisoning. The basic approaches described here are likely to be of general

utility for investigating chemically diverse threat agents that elicit changes in the electrical behavior or Ca²⁺ dynamics of neuronal networks *in vitro*. The rapid throughput approaches are also expected to be useful for identifying novel targeted interventions and for optimizing therapeutic strategies involving drug combinations.

SUPPLEMENTARY DATA

Supplementary data are available online at <http://toxsci.oxfordjournals.org/>.

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