Title

Intra-articular AAV-PHP.S mediated chemogenetic targeting of knee-innervating dorsal root ganglion neurons alleviates inflammatory pain in mice.

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Abstract

Objective:

Joint pain is the major clinical symptom of arthritis that affects millions of people. Controlling the excitability of knee-innervating dorsal root ganglion (DRG) neurons (knee neurons) could potentially provide pain relief. Therefore, our objective was to evaluate whether the newly engineered adeno-associated virus (AAV) serotype, AAV-PHP.S, can deliver functional artificial receptors to control knee neuron excitability following intra-articular knee injection.

Methods:

AAV-PHP.S virus packaged with dTomato fluorescent protein and either excitatory (G_q) or inhibitory (G_i) designer receptors activated by designer drugs (DREADDs) was injected into the knee joint of adult mice. Labelling of DRG neurons by AAV-PHP.S from the knee was evaluated using immunohistochemistry. Functionality of G_q- and G_i-DREADDs was evaluated using whole-cell patch clamp electrophysiology on acutely cultured DRG neurons. Pain behavior in mice was assessed using a digging assay, dynamic weight bearing and rotarod, before and after intra-peritoneal administration of the DREADD activator, Compound 21.

Results:

We show that AAV-PHP.S can deliver functional genes into the DRG neurons when injected into the knee joint in a similar manner to the well-established retrograde tracer, fast blue. Short-term activation of AAV-PHP.S delivered Gq-DREADD increases excitability of knee neurons in vitro, without inducing overt pain in mice when activated in vivo. By contrast, in vivo G_i-DREADD activation alleviated complete Freund's adjuvant mediated

knee inflammation-induced deficits in digging behavior, with a concomitant decrease in knee neuron excitability observed in vitro.

Conclusions

We describe an AAV-mediated chemogenetic approach to specifically control joint pain, which may be utilized in translational arthritic pain research.

71 **Introduction**

72 Peripheral sensitization, manifested by an increase in the excitability of dorsal root ganglion
73 (DRG) neurons, underlies many chronic pain pathologies, such as inflammatory arthritis (1).
74 DRG neurons display great heterogeneity, based upon both gene expression (2,3) and
75 functional attributes (4), and this heterogeneity is further compounded by target innervation
76 (5,6). The variation in DRG neurons offers a unique opportunity to selectively tune the
77 excitability of a distinct subset of DRG neurons in order to provide pain relief with reduced
78 side-effects. For example, we have recently shown that the excitability of knee-innervating
79 DRG neurons (identified by retrograde tracing) is increased in a mouse model of inflammatory
80 joint pain (7) and after incubation with human osteoarthritis (OA) synovial fluid samples (8) .
81 These results suggest that modulation of the knee-innervating DRG neuron subset (knee
82 neurons) could help control arthritic pain.

83

84 One way of modulating neuronal excitability is to induce expression of inhibitory or excitatory
85 designer receptors exclusively activated by exogenous chemical actuators which by themselves
86 do not have any endogenous effects. Modified muscarinic receptor based designer receptors
87 activated by designer drugs (DREADDs) is a technology based on this principle that can
88 increase or decrease neuronal (mostly in the central nervous system, CNS) firing, which
89 consequently affects a variety of behaviors (reviewed in (9,10)), such as enhanced feeding (11)
90 or decreased wakefulness (12). In the peripheral nervous system (PNS), activation of the
91 inhibitory DREADD $hM_4D(G_i)$ in voltage-gated sodium channel 1.8 ($Na_V1.8$) expressing DRG
92 neurons decreased knee hyperalgesia and mechanical allodynia, along with a decrease in DRG
93 neuron firing, in mice with early experimental OA pain induced by surgical destabilization of
94 the medial meniscus (13). Similarly, activating G_i-DREADD in transient receptor potential

95 vanilloid 1 (TRPV1) expressing DRG neurons (14) increased the heat pain threshold and
96 reduced neuronal excitability in mice. Both of these studies used transgenic mice and therefore
97 are less translatable across species due to the technical difficulties associated with targeting
98 sensory neuron sub-populations in species without such transgenic tractability. In wild-type
99 mice, G_i-DREADD delivered intraneurally to the sciatic nerve via adeno-associated virus 6
00 (AAV6) was able to increase both mechanical and thermal thresholds (15). Importantly
01 however, none of these studies were specific to DRG neuron subsets innervating specific
02 organs.
03
04 AAVs are useful tools for gene transfer that have been used for gene therapy in a variety of
05 human diseases (16), with multiple AAV-based clinical trials currently underway for arthritis
06 (Clinical trial # NCT02727764, NCT02790723 (17)). AAVs can be utilized in conjunction with
07 DREADD technology to selectively modulate neuronal activity of specific neuronal circuitry.
08 Indeed, this has been achieved in the CNS (18). However, delivering genes by AAV injection
09 into a peripheral organ to DRG neurons is challenging because of the low transduction
10 capability of AAVs and the large anatomical distances involved in the PNS (19). A variety of
11 AAV serotypes have shown little efficacy in transducing DRG neurons when injected sub-
12 cutaneously, intra-muscularly or intra-plantarly in adult mice (20,21). To date direct injection
13 into DRG (22) or intrathecal injection (23,24) are the best ways for transducing DRG neurons,
14 however, these routes of administration are invasive, technically complicated to perform and
15 do not enable transduction of neurons innervating a defined target. In the present study, we
16 provide evidence that the PNS specific AAV serotype, AAV-PHP.S (19), can infect DRG
17 neurons with functional cargo following injection into the knee joint. Furthermore, using the
18 inhibitory DREADD, $hM_4D(G_i)$, as a cargo, we show that its activation normalizes the

inflammatory pain induced deficit in digging behavior in mice, which is an ethologically relevant spontaneous pain measure indicating well-being (25). This study thus extends the use of AAV and DREADD technologies to study DRG neurons infected from a peripheral organ, which can have future clinically-relevant applications in controlling pain pathologies.

43 **Materials and Methods**

44

45 Animals

46 10-15 week old C57BL/6J (Envigo) mice (n = 30) of both sexes were used in this study. Mice
47 were housed in groups of up to 5 in a temperature controlled (21 °C) room on a 12-hour/light
48 dark cycle with food, water and appropriate enrichment available *ad libitum.* Mice used in this
49 study were regulated under the Animals (Scientific Procedure) Act 1986, Amendment
50 Regulations 2012. All protocols were approved by a UK Home Office project license
51 (P7EBFC1B1) and reviewed by the University of Cambridge Animal Welfare and Ethical
52 Review Body.

53

54 Viruses

55 AAV-PHP.S-CAG-tdTomato (Addgene #59462-PHP.S) was purchased from Addgene. AAV
56 plasmids for DREADD viruses were purchased from Addgene (Table S1) and packaged at the
57 European Molecular Biology Laboratory, Rome as has been described previously (26). Briefly,
58 ten 150 mm dishes of HEK293T (ATCC) cells were triple transfected with plasmids (Table S1)
59 of AAV-PHP.S, helper (Agilent) and cargo in a 1:4:1 ratio with PEI reagent (1:3 plasmid to PEI
60 ratio, Sigma). Three days after transfection, cells and media were collected and this mixture
61 was centrifuged at 3700xg at 4°C to remove debris and then concentrated by ultrafiltration using
62 Vivaflow 200 (Sartorius). The purified AAV particles were collected after running the viral
63 concentrate through an iodixanol column (Opti-Prep density gradient medium, Alere
64 Technologies) by ultracentrifugation (Beckmann, L8-70M) at 44400xg for 2 hr at 18 °C
65 followed by filtration using a 100 kDa filter to further concentrate the sample and for buffer
66 exchange. Viral titres (vg/ml) were measured by probing for WPRE regions (forward:

67 GGCTGTTGGGCACTGACAAT, reverse: CCGAAGGGACGTAGCAGAAG) using
68 SyBR green qPCR of linearized virus particles as described previously (26) using a
69 StepOnePlus Real Time PCR system, following the manufacturer's guidelines on settings
70 (Applied Biosystems).
71
72 Knee injections
73 All knee injections were conducted under anesthesia (100 mg/kg ketamine and 10 mg/kg
74 xylazine, intra-peritoneally) through the patellar tendon. For experiments with retrograde
75 tracing, 1.5 µl of fast blue (FB) or titer-matched AAV-PHP.S viruses were injected intra-
76 articularly into knee joints (~$4x10^{11}$ vg of AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato and ~$5x10^{11}$ vg of
77 AAV-PHP.S packaged with G_i and G_q-DREADD into each knee). The titer values were chosen
78 based on a pilot experiment conducted with AAV-PHP.S-CAG-YFP, injection of 2 ul (~$3x10^{11}$
79 vg) and 10 ul (~$10^{\wedge 12}$ vg) labelled a similar number of neurons as assessed by acute culture. For
80 experiments involving inflammation, 7.5 µl CFA (10 mg/ml, Chondrex) was injected into the
81 left knee and Vernier's calipers were used to measure knee width (as before (7)) pre- and 24-
82 hour post-CFA injection.
83
84 Behavioral testing
85 All behavioral experiments were carried out between 10:00 and 13:00 in the presence of one
86 male and one female experimenter. Mice were assigned randomly to control and experimental
87 groups and at least two cohorts of mice (8-12 mice in each group) were assessed in each group
88 on separate days. Mice were trained on digging and rotarod one day before the test days. The
89 following groups were tested in this study:

90 1. **Compound 21 (C21) controls:** Behavioral tests (described below) were performed on
91 mice with no knee injections 20 min before and after C21 (2 mg/kg diluted in sterile
92 saline from a stock of 100 mM in ethanol, i.p., Tocris) injection.
93 2. **Activation of G_q-DREADD:** 3-4 weeks after intra-articular administration of virus,
94 mice were behaviorally tested 20 min before and after vehicle (1:100 ethanol in sterile
95 saline) or C21 injections.
96 3. **Activation of G_i-DREADD:** 3-4 weeks after intra-articular administration of virus,
97 baseline behavioral tests were conducted on mice (pre-CFA). CFA was injected into the
98 knee joints the next day to induce inflammation. 24-hours after that, animals were re-
99 tested 20 min before (post-CFA) and after (post-C21) vehicle or C21 injections.
00

01 Digging

02 Digging behavior was measured as an assessment of spontaneous pain as described before (7)
03 for three min in a standard cage with a wire lid, filled with Aspen midi 8/20 wood chip bedding
04 (LBS Biotechnology). For training, mice were habituated in the test room in their home cages
05 for 30 min then they were allowed to dig twice for 3 min with 30 min break in between. On
06 each subsequent test day, mice were habituated and tested once on the 3 min paradigm. Test
07 sessions were video recorded from which the digging duration was later independently coded
08 by the experimenters, blinded to the conditions. Number of dig sites (burrows) was coded on
09 test days by the experimenters.
10

11 Rotarod

12 Locomotor function and coordination of mice were tested using a rotarod apparatus (Ugo Basile
13 7650). Mice were tested on a constant speed rotarod at 7 rpm for 1 min, then in an accelerating

program (7-40 rpm in 5 min) for 6 min. The same protocol was used to train mice one day before testing. Mice were removed from the rotarod after two passive rotations or when they fell from the rotarod. Mice were video recorded on test days and one experimenter blinded to the conditions coded these videos for latency(s) to passive rotation or fall.

Dynamic weight bearing

Deficit in weight bearing capacity is a characteristic measure of spontaneous inflammatory pain behavior and we measured this behavior using a dynamic weight bearing (DWB) device (Bioseb) in freely moving mice for 3 min. Animals were not trained in this device and coding was done by one experimenter, blinded to the conditions. In at least 1 min 30 sec of the 3 min recording, fore- and hind paw prints were identified using the two highest confidence levels (based on correlation between manual software algorithm tracking) of the in-built software, at least 30 s of which was manually verified.

DRG neuron culture

Lumbar DRG (L2-L5) were collected from a subset of mice in the vehicle group 3-4 weeks after virus injections in ice cold dissociation media (as before (7)). DRG were then enzymatically digested followed by mechanical trituration (7). Dissociated DRG neurons, thus isolated, were then plated onto poly-D-lysine and laminin coated glass bottomed dishes (MatTek, P35GC-1.5-14-C) in DRG culture medium contained L-15 Medium (1X) + GlutaMAX-l, 10% (v/v) fetal bovine serum, 24 mM $NaHCO_3$, 38 mM glucose, 2% penicillin/streptomycin and maintained overnight (8-10-hours) in a humidified, 37 °C, 5% CO_2 incubator before recording.

38 Electrophysiology

39 For control experiments, DRG neurons were bathed in extracellular solution containing (ECS,
40 in mM): NaCl (140), KCl (4), $MgCl_2$ (1), $CaCl_2$ (2), glucose (4) and HEPES (10) adjusted to
41 pH 7.4 with NaOH while recording. To investigate effects of C21 activation, neurons were
42 incubated 10 min prior to the start of recording and throughout the recordings in 10 nM C21
43 (diluted in ECS from 100 mM stock). Only virus transduced mice identified by their
44 fluorescence upon excitation with a 572 nm LED (Cairn Research) were recorded using patch
45 pipettes of 5–10 MΩ (P-97 Flaming/Brown puller, Sutter Instruments) containing intracellular
46 solution (in mM): KCl (110), NaCl (10), $MgCl_2$ (1), EGTA (1), HEPES (10), Na_2ATP (2),
47 Na_2GTP (0.5) adjusted to pH 7.3 with KOH.

48

49 Action potentials (AP) were recorded in current clamp mode without current injection (to
50 investigate spontaneous AP firing) or after step-wise injection of 80 ms current pulses from 0 –
51 1050 pA in 50 pA steps using a HEKA EPC-10 amplifier (Lambrecht) and the corresponding
52 Patchmaster software. AP properties were analysed using Fitmaster software (HEKA) or
53 IgorPro software (Wavemetrics) as described before (7). Neurons were excluded from analysis
54 if they did not fire an AP in response to current injections.

55

56 Immunohistochemistry

57 Mice with unilateral, co-injections of AAV-PHP.S-tdTomato (2 ul) and FB (1.5 ul) were
58 transcardially perfused with 4% (w/v) paraformaldehyde (PFA; in PBS, pH 7.4) under terminal
59 anesthesia (sodium pentobarbital, 200 mg/kg, i.p.). L2-L5 DRG were then collected from the
60 injected side, while L3-L4 were collected from the non-injected side and post-fixed in
61 Zamboni's fixative for 1-hour, followed by overnight incubation in 30% (w/v) sucrose (in PBS)

at 4 °C for cryo-protection. DRG were then embedded, snap-frozen, sectioned and stained as described previously (7) using anti-TRPV1 antibody (1:500, Alomone, AGP-118, anti-guinea pig polyclonal) with Alexa-488 conjugated secondary antibody (1:500, Jackson Laboratory, 706-545-148, anti-guinea pig). Positive neurons were scored as has been reported previously (7) using a R toolkit (https://github.com/amapruns/Immunohistochemistry_Analysis) followed by manual validation. Briefly, mean grey value (intensity) of all neurons on 1-3 sections from each DRG level of interest from each mouse was measured using ImageJ. A neuron was scored positive for a stain if it had an intensity value greater than average normalized minimum grey value across all sections + 2 times the standard deviation.

Statistics

Comparisons between two groups were made using appropriate (paired for repeated measures and unpaired otherwise) Student's t-test while three group comparisons were made using one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) followed by Holm-Sidak multiple comparison tests. Chi-sq tests were utilized to compare proportions of categorical variables. Data are presented as mean ± standard error of mean.

Results

1. Knee injected AAV-PHP.S robustly transduces DRG neurons

AAV-PHP.S was engineered to have a higher specificity towards peripheral neurons (19) and thus we hypothesized that this AAV serotype would be able to transduce DRG neurons when injected intra-articularly into the knee joint. Consistent with our hypothesis, when AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato and the commonly used retrograde tracer fast blue (FB) were co-injected unilaterally into one knee of mice (n = 3, female), we observed both FB and virus labelling (Fig 1A). In agreement with previous reports using FB and other retrograde tracers (7,27,28), we observed a similar proportion of labelling in the lumbar DRG with FB and AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato (FB %: L2: 6.6 ± 2.7, L3: 8.3 ± 1.4, L4: 6.6 ± 1.2, L5: 3.3 ± 1.6; AAV-PHP.S %: L2: 9.0 ± 2.8, L3: 7.3 ± 1.2, L4: 4.0 ± 0.5, L5: 3.3 ± 1.2, Fig 1B). Across L2-L5 DRG, there was ~ 40 % co-labelling of neurons with FB and AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato suggesting that neither retrograde tracer is able to label the entire knee neuron population (Fig 1C, Fig S1). However, area analysis of the labelled neurons suggests that similar sized neurons are targeted by both strategies (Fig S1). Furthermore, we observed minimum labelling in the contralateral side (Fig S1). Previous reports suggest that ~40 % of knee neurons are TRPV1 expressing putative nociceptors (7,28). Similarly, with immunohistochemistry analysis of DRG neurons, we find that ~30 % of viral labelled and FB labelled neurons (mostly small diameter neurons) express TRPV1 (Fig 1D, Fig S1) suggesting that viral transduction did not substantially alter expression of the nociceptive protein, TRPV1. Taken together, we find that intra-articular injection of AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato in the knee joint transduces mouse DRG neurons in a similar manner to a routinely used retrograde tracer.

10 **2. Excitatory G_q-DREADD delivered intra-articularly by AAV-PHP.S-hSyn-hM$_3$D(G_q)-**
11 **mCherry does not change spontaneous pain behavior, but provokes a deficit in motor**
12 **coordination.**

13 Next we tested whether AAV-PHP.S can deliver functional hM$_3$D(G_q) cargo into knee neurons
14 via intra-articular injection, using whole-cell patch clamp on acutely dissociated neurons
15 isolated from mice with no previous exposure to the DREADD activator Compound (C21). C21
16 was chosen as the DREADD activator since it has good bioavailability (plasma concentration
17 measured to be at 57% 1 hour post injection), is not converted into clozapine or clozapine-N-
18 oxide (29) and had no off-target effect in the behavioral tests conducted in this study in naïve
19 mice not injected with DREADDs (Fig S2). G_q-DREADDs couple to G_qPCR pathways and thus
20 their activation causes neuronal excitation (9). Therefore, we hypothesized that when incubated
21 with 10 nM C21, virally transduced neurons would be hyperexcitable compared to virally
22 transduced neurons bathed in normal extracellular solution (ECS). In agreement with this
23 hypothesis, we observed an increased number of mostly small and medium diameter (Fig S3)
24 neurons (Ctrl, 5.3% vs. C21, 27.8% $p = 0.03$, chi-sq test) firing action potentials (AP) without
25 injection of current in the C21 group (Fig 2A,B,S3). Moreover, upon injection of increasing
26 stepwise current injections, the action potential (AP) threshold was decreased ($p = 0.02$,
27 unpaired t-test) in the C21 group (Fig 2C); no change was observed in other electrical properties
28 measured in these neurons (Table 1).
29

30 Based on previous studies (7,8), we hypothesized that the measured increased excitability of
31 knee-innervating neurons in vitro via the G_q-DREADD system would cause pain-like behavior
32 in mice in vivo, which was tested by measuring digging behavior (a measure of spontaneous
33 pain as described previously (7,30)), dynamic weight bearing and rotarod behavior (a measure

34 of motor co-ordination) (31) (Timeline in Fig 2D). Three weeks after virus injection into both
35 knee joints, mice (n = 8, 4 males, 4 females in each group) injected with vehicle or C21 did not
36 show changes in digging behavior (Digging duration: Pre vs. Post veh, 31.6 ± 3.7 ms vs. 21.3
37 ± 4.4 ms, Pre vs. Post C21, 25.2 ± 4.9 ms vs. 32.7 ± 4.7 ms; Number of burrows: Pre vs. Post
38 veh, 4.6 ± 0.5 vs. 3.5 ± 0.4, Pre vs. Post C21, 3.9 ± 0.7 vs. 3.6 ± 0.5, Fig 2E,F) or weight bearing
39 (Front/Rear paw weight ratio: Pre vs. Post veh, 0.5 ± 0.02 vs. 0.5 ± 0.04, Pre vs. Post C21, 0.4±
40 0.06 vs. 0.4 ± 0.03, Fig 2G,H). By contrast, after injection of C21, mice showed a marked
41 decline in their ability to remain on the rotarod (Pre vs. Post veh, 273.5 ± 27.2 s vs. 243.9 ±
42 32.7 s, Pre vs. Post C21, 336.1 ± 12.9 s vs. 249.0 ± 18.9 s, p = 0.002, paired t-test) suggesting
43 a deficit in their motor co-ordination (Fig 2I,J). DRG for all virus injected mice were visualized
44 under a fluorescence microscope to check for viral transduction and a subset of these DRG were
45 further analyzed to reveal similar transduction profiles between AAV-PHP.S-hSyn-
46 G_qDREADD-mCherry and AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato (Fig S3), i.e. different promoters do
47 not significantly affect transduction.
48
49 Taken together, our data show that AAV-PHP.S delivers functional G_q-DREADD into knee
50 neurons and that when virally transduced knee neurons are activated they do not produce overt
51 pain-like behavior in vivo, but do cause a deficit in motor coordination.
52
53 3. **Inhibitory G_i-DREADD delivered intra-articularly by AAV-PHP.S-hSyn-hM$_4$D(G_i)-**
54 **mCherry reverses digging behavior deficits associated with inflammatory pain.**
55
56 Intra-articular injection of complete Freund's adjuvant (CFA) induces robust knee
57 inflammation in mice (Ctrl knee: pre CFA day, 3.1 ± 0.03 mm, post CFA day, 3.1 ± 0.03 mm;

58 CFA knee: pre CFA day, 3.1 ± 0.02 mm, post CFA day, 4.0 ± 0.05 mm, n = 24, $p < 0.0001$,
59 paired t-test, Fig 3A,B) and has been previously shown to increase the excitability of knee
60 neurons innervating the inflamed knee compared to those innervating the contralateral side (7).
61 The post-CFA knee measurements were conducted at the end of behavioral measurements, thus
62 suggesting that regardless of G_i-DREADD activation knee inflammation persisted at 24-hour
63 post-CFA injection.
64
65 We hypothesized that incubating G_i-DREADD expressing knee neurons from the CFA side
66 with C21 would reverse this increased neuronal excitability. Using whole-cell patch clamp
67 electrophysiology of small and medium diameter (Fig S4) knee neurons, although there was no
68 change in the resting membrane potential across any condition (Fig 3C, Table 2), the percentage
69 of CFA knee neurons firing spontaneous AP decreased after G_i-DREADD activation (CFA,
70 15% vs. CFA+ C21, 0%, $p = 0.02$, chi-sq test, Fig 3C,S3). Moreover, in the absence of G_i-
71 DREADD activation, CFA knee neurons had a decreased AP threshold compared to neurons
72 from the control side, but the AP threshold of CFA knee neurons that were incubated in C21
73 was similar to that of neurons from the control side ($p = 0.005$, ANOVA, Fig 3D). These results
74 suggest that G_i-DREADD activation reverses CFA-induced increase in neuronal excitability in
75 vitro. Other electrical properties between groups were unchanged (Table 2).
76
77 The ability of G_i-DREADD to modulate pain behavior in DRG neurons is unclear with one
78 study showing an increase in latency to both thermal and mechanical stimuli (15), but another
79 showing only an increase in the paw withdrawal latency to thermal stimuli (14). Nevertheless,
80 based on the in vitro results in these studies, we hypothesized that activation of G_i-DREADDs
81 in knee neurons post CFA would reverse spontaneous pain behavior in mice (timeline in Fig

82 3E). In the control cohort of mice (n = 9, 5 males, 4 females) that received vehicle 24-hours
83 after CFA injection, the CFA-induced decrease in digging behavior persisted compared to pre
84 CFA (Digging duration: Pre CFA, 29.6 ± 2.7 ms, post CFA 16.6 ± 4.0 ms, post veh, 9.8 ± 2.8
85 ms, $p = 0.0005$, repeated measures ANOVA; Number of burrows: Pre CFA, 4.8 ± 0.3, post CFA
86 2.9 ± 0.3 ms, post veh, 2.3 ± 0.5 ms, n = 9, $p < 0.0001$, repeated measures ANOVA, Fig 3F).
87 However, when C21 was administered to a separate cohort of mice (n = 11, 7 males, 4 females)
88 24-hours after CFA injection, there was a marked recovery in digging behavior (Digging
89 duration: Pre CFA, 29.7 ± 4.5 ms, post CFA 7.8 ± 1.9 ms, post C21, 19.0 ± 3.9 ms, $p = 0.0002$,
90 repeated measures ANOVA; Number of burrows: Pre CFA, 4.5 ± 0.3, post CFA 2.4 ± 0.3 ms,
91 post C21, 3.6 ± 1.4 ms, $p = 0.0005$, repeated measures ANOVA, Fig 3G) suggesting that
92 decreasing the excitability of knee neurons via G_i-DREADD reduces inflammation induced
93 spontaneous pain that is associated with an increase in the feeling of well-being and hence more
94 digging. In contrast, acute chemogenetic inhibition of knee neurons was insufficient to reverse
95 the CFA-induced deficit in dynamic weight bearing (Rear left weight bearing as % of body
96 weight: Pre CFA, 26.2 ± 2.0, post CFA, 10.6 ± 1.7, post veh, 11.6 ± 1.5, $p < 0.0001$; Pre CFA,
97 26.1 ± 1.1, post CFA, 12.4 ± 1.4, post C21, 13.3 ± 2.2, $p < 0.0001$, repeated measures ANOVA,
98 Fig 3H,I) which might be because gait changes relating to weight bearing is more reflective of
99 changes in joint biomechanics that are difficult to reverse by analgesics (32). Furthermore, no
00 change in rotarod behavior was observed following CFA-induced knee inflammation
01 suggesting that this model does not cause an overt change in gross motor function and similarly
02 G_i-DREADD activation also had no effect (Pre CFA, 303.8 ± 18.3 s, post CFA, 315.9 ± 11.9 s,
03 post veh, 306.6 ± 16.8 s; Pre CFA, 282.7 ± 17.3 s, post CFA, 286.4 ± 25.3 s, post C21, 317.4 ±
04 10.3 s, Fig 3J,K). DRG for all virus injected mice were visualized under a fluorescence
05 microscope to check for viral transduction (Fig S4).

Taken together, our results suggest that specific inhibition of knee neuron excitability can reverse inflammation-induced deficit in digging behavior.

30 **Discussion**

31

32 The findings in this study show that the AAV-PHP.S serotype can retrogradely deliver cargo
33 to DRG neurons in a peripheral tissue-specific manner when injected into the knee joints without
34 the need for invasive procedures or the requirement to generate transgenic mice. The transduction
35 efficacy of the virus is similar to the widely used retrograde tracer, FB. In-line with other co-
36 labelling studies (33), the ~40% co-localization of AAV-PHP.S and FB fluorescence suggests that
37 not all knee neurons are labeled by either tracer and the less than 100% co-labeling is possibly due
38 to their differing modes of retrograde transfer (34,35).

39 Using this system, we show that it is possible to increase or decrease knee neuron
40 excitability in vitro when G_q or G_i-DREADD cargoes were delivered by AAV-PHP.S respectively
41 and hence provide joint specific pain control. This result can also be extended to study the role of
42 anatomically specific neuronal excitability when exposed to a variety of stimuli or pharmacological
43 interventions. In vivo, we restricted our chemogenetic activation to a short duration to reflect acute
44 pain and within this timeframe saw no spontaneous pain-like behavior with activation of G_q-
45 DREADD in knee neurons. We surmise that G_q-mediated sub-threshold activation (36) of the
46 relatively low percentage of DRG neurons did not provide sufficient nociceptive input to drive
47 change in ethologically relevant pain behavior; whereas the observed decrease in coordination
48 suggests that we have behaviorally engaged the virally transduced neurons. Furthermore, we note
49 that intra-articular injection described here would transduce DREADDs to both nociceptive and
50 non-nociceptive population of knee neurons, therefore, a clear nocifensive behavior might not be
51 apparent, i.e. a limitation of this study is that distinct subpopulations of knee neurons are not
52 targeted, but future studies could address this once such populations have been described for the
53 knee as has already been conducted for the colon (5). Future studies using a repeated dosing strategy

54 could also be employed in our system for modelling chronic pain, being cautious of the potential
55 risk of receptor desensitization (9).

56 Perhaps more relevant to future clinical applications in arthritic pain is the ability of G_i-
57 DREADDs to reverse pain behavior by decreasing neuronal excitability of knee neurons. Indeed,
58 we show that G_i-DREADD activation restores a deficit in digging behavior induced by
59 inflammatory knee pain. This strategy can be further refined to selectively inhibit genetically
60 specific subpopulation of knee neurons by combining Cre-inducible viruses with their
61 corresponding Cre-expressing transgenic mouse lines, and hence provide insights into relative
62 contributions of different knee neuron sub-populations in arthritic pain. Selectively exciting specific
63 knee neuron sub-populations with G_q-DREADD might also produce pain-like behaviors that were
64 not observed in this study. We also report that the CFA-induced deficit in weight bearing was not
65 reversed following activation of G_i-DREADD in knee neurons, consistent with a previous report
66 observing that reversal of deficits in gait changes are difficult to achieve with analgesics (32).

67 Although findings from this study imply that modulating excitability of anatomically
68 specific peripheral neurons could control arthritic pain, a number of challenges remain to be
69 addressed before their clinical translation. Since virus transduction and expression profile is
70 different between non-human primates and rodents, the expression profile of AAV-PHP.S needs to
71 be first validated in non-human primates (37). Additional work is also required to engineer more
72 PNS specific AAVs and to optimize DREADDs (38) and their corresponding ligands (39) for
73 increasing transduction efficiency and regulating dosing.

74 Overall, the present study provides initial proof-of-concept that peripheral tissue innervating
75 DRG neurons can be specifically modulated by AAVs, opening the door to future studies on gene
76 therapy in controlling arthritic pain.

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Author contributions: S.C. designed experiments, collected and analyzed data and wrote the manuscript. L.A.P. collected and analyzed behavioral data and revised the manuscript. B.D. helped with virus production. R.H.R. and H.B. helped with immunohistochemistry analysis. G.C. helped with behavioral experiments and revised the manuscript. P.A.H. and E. St. J. S. designed experiments and revised the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

Competing interests: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data and materials availability: Data presented in this article will be available in the Cambridge University Apollo repository (https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.46171).

Figures and Tables

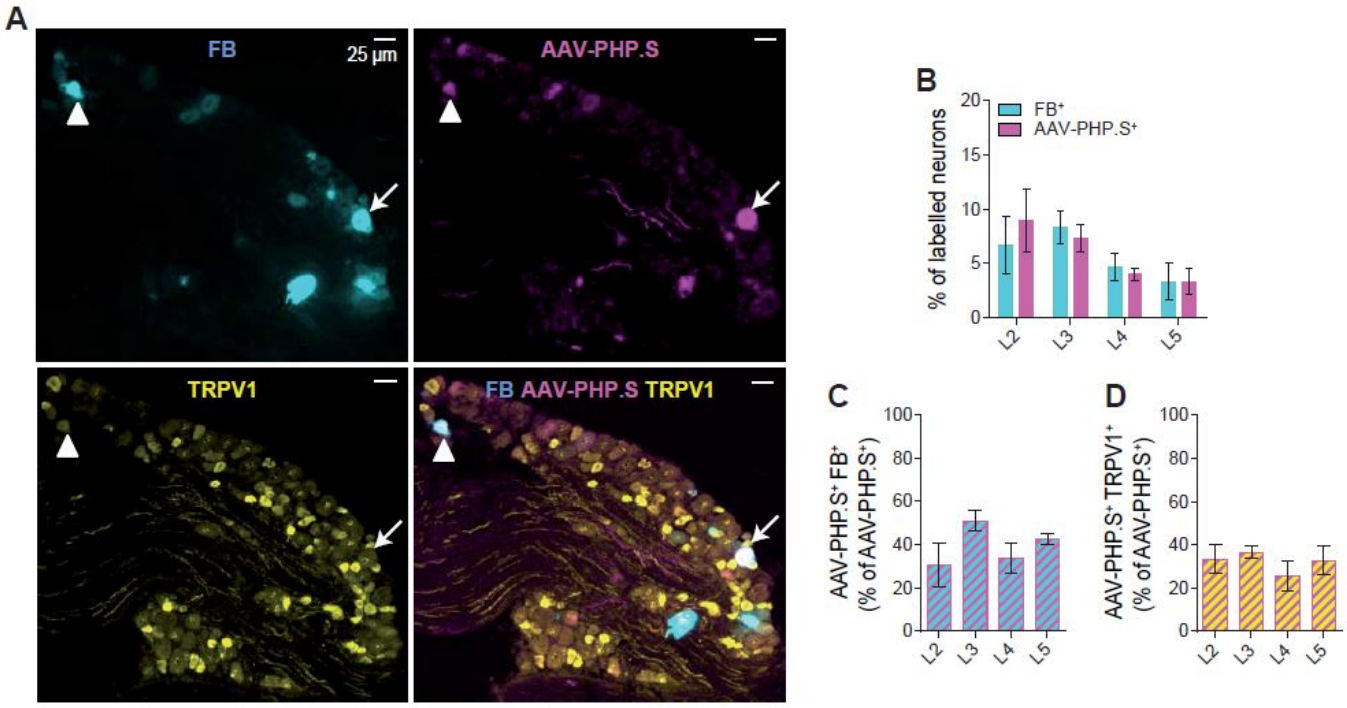

Fig. 1. Retrograde tracing of knee-innervating DRG neurons using FB and AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato. A) Representative images of a whole L3 DRG section showing knee neurons traced using FB (blue), AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato (pink) and stained using an anti-TRPV1 antibody (yellow). White triangle is pointing at a neuron that had FB, AAV-PHP.S and TRPV1 colocalization, while the white arrow is pointing at a neuron that shows only FB and AAV-PHP.S co-localization. B) Bar graphs showing percent of labelled neurons in L2-L5 DRG with FB and AAV-PHP.S. Percent of neurons showing co-localization of FB and AAV-PHP.S (C), and TRPV1 and AAV-PHP.S (D), expressed as a percent of AAV-PHP.S^{+} neurons. The error bars represent the SEM in the data obtained from three female mice.

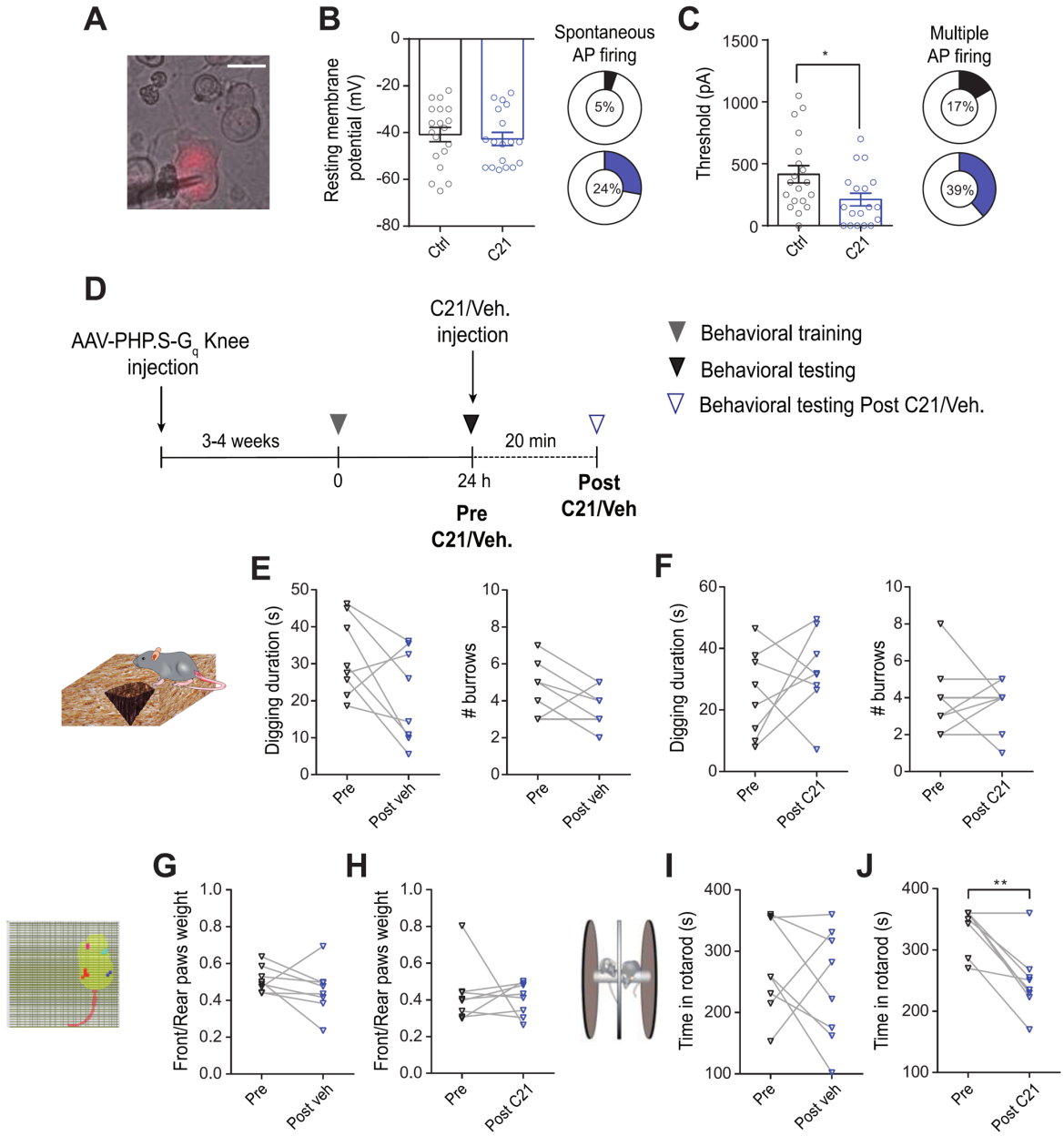

Fig. 2. G_q-DREADD activation of knee neurons in-vitro and in-vivo. A) Representative image of an AAV-PHP.S-hSyn-hM$_3$D(G_q)-mCherry transduced neuron (Scale bar = 25 µm, triangular shadow = recording electrode). B) bars showing resting membrane potential in Ctrl (black, n = 19) and C21 (blue, n = 18) conditions, pie-chart showing percent of neurons in each condition that fired spontaneous AP. C) Bars showing AP firing threshold in Ctrl (black, n = 19) and C21 (blue, n = 18) conditions, pie-chart showing percent of neurons in

each condition that fired multiple AP upon current injection. *$p < 0.05$, unpaired t-test. Data obtained from 3 females and 2 male mice. D) Timeline showing when behaviors were conducted. Digging duration and burrows (along with schematic diagram), ratio of front and rear paw weight (along with schematic diagram) and rotarod behavior (along with schematic diagram) before and after vehicle (E, G, I) or C21 injection (F, H, J). ** $p < 0.01$, paired t-test. Data obtained from 4 female and 4 male mice. Error bars = SEM.

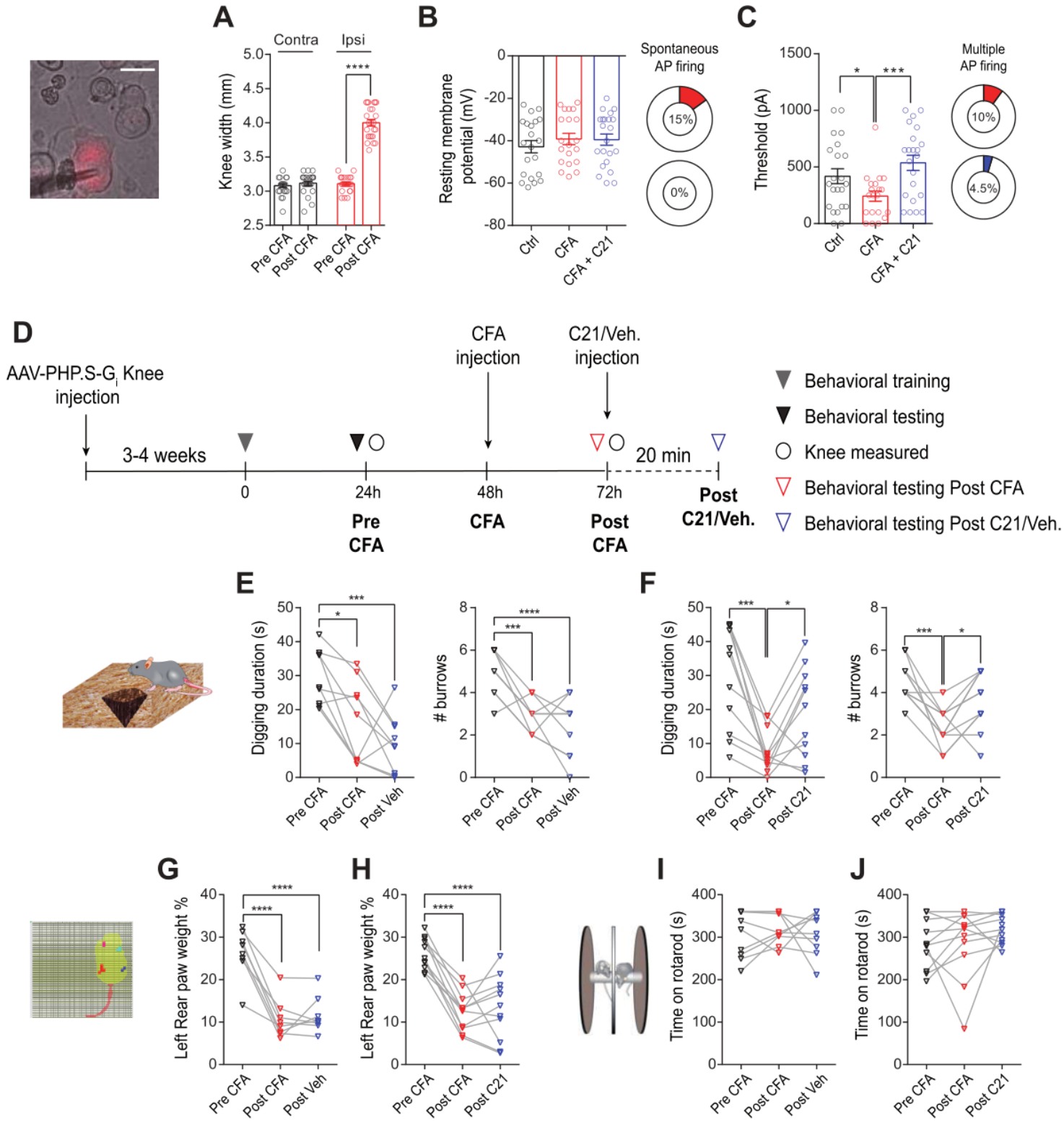

Fig. 3. G_i-DREADD activation of knee neurons in vitro and in vivo. A) Bars representing knee width before and after CFA injection in the non-injected (contra, black) and injected knee

(ipsi, red), **** $p < 0.0001$, $n = 20$, paired t-test. B) Bars showing resting membrane potential in Ctrl (black, $n = 22$), CFA (red, $n = 20$) and CFA+C21 (blue, $n = 22$) conditions, pie-chart showing percent of neurons in CFA and CFA+C21 condition that fired spontaneous AP. C) Bars showing AP firing threshold in Ctrl (black, $n = 22$), CFA (red, $n = 20$) and CFA+C21 (blue, $n = 22$) conditions, pie-chart showing percent of neurons in CFA and CFA+C21 condition that fired multiple AP upon current injection. *$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.001$ ANOVA and Holm-Sidak multiple comparison test. Data obtained from 2 female and 2 male mice. D) Timeline showing when behaviors were conducted. Digging duration and number of burrows, rear left paw weight expressed as percent of body weight and rotarod behavior pre and post-CFA and after vehicle (E, G, I, 4 female and 5 male mice) or C21 injection (F, H, J, 4 female and 7 male mice). *$p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$, **** $p < 0.0001$ repeated measures ANOVA and Holm-Sidak multiple comparison test. Error bars = SEM.

68 **Table 1: Action potential properties of G_q-DREADD intra-articularly transduced knee**
69 **neurons.** RMP = Resting membrane potential, HPD = Half peak duration. * = $p < 0.05$ unpaired t-
70 test.
71

	Ctrl (n = 19)		**C21 (n = 18)**	
	Mean	SEM	Mean	SEM
RMP (mV)	-40.8	3.0	-42.7	2.8
Threshold (pA)	415.8	69.7	211.1*	51.4
HPD (ms)	2.6	0.5	1.9	0.3
Afterhyperpolarization amplitude (AHP peak, mV)	14.7	2.1	16.8	2.8

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Table 2: Action potential properties of G_i-DREADD intra-articularly transduced knee neurons. RMP = resting membrane potential, HPD = Half peak duration. * = $p < 0.05$ CFA vs. Ctrl, $$ = $p < 0.01$ CFA vs. CFA+C21, unpaired t-test.

	Ctrl (n = 22)		**CFA (n = 20)**		**CFA + C21 (n = 22)**	
	Mean	SEM	Mean	SEM	Mean	SEM
RMP (mV)	-42.9	2.9	-39.2	2.7	-39.5	2.7
Threshold (pA)	418.2*	65.6	242.5	45.0	536.4$$	66.5
HPD (ms)	2.4	0.6	2.9	0.5	2.1	0.3
Afterhyperpolarization amplitude (AHP peak, mV)	12.9	1.3	16.5	1.3	13.8	1.6

Supplementary Materials

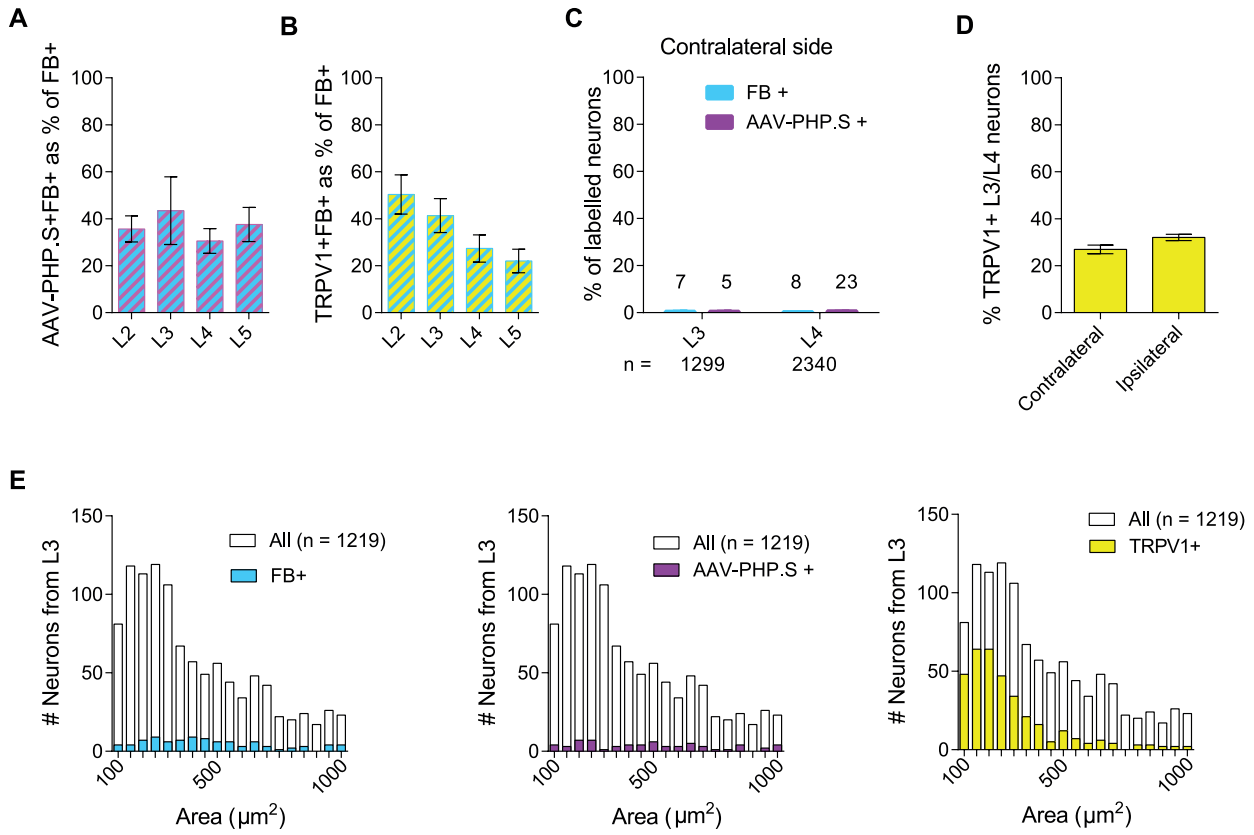

Fig. S1. Specific Retrograde tracing of knee neurons with FB and AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato. Bar graphs showing co-localization of FB and AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato labelled neurons (A) and TRPV1 and AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato labelled neurons (B) expressed as a percent of FB^+ neurons. C) Percent of neurons showing FB and AAV-like fluorescence in the non-injected (contralateral) side. Numbers above bars represent total number of stained neurons and below the bars represent total number of neurons analyzed. D) Percent of $TRPV1^+$ neurons in the injected (ipsilateral) and contralateral side. E) Histograms showing size distribution of L3 DRG neurons stained with FB, AAV-PHP.S and TRPV1 respectively. Data obtained from 3 female mice.

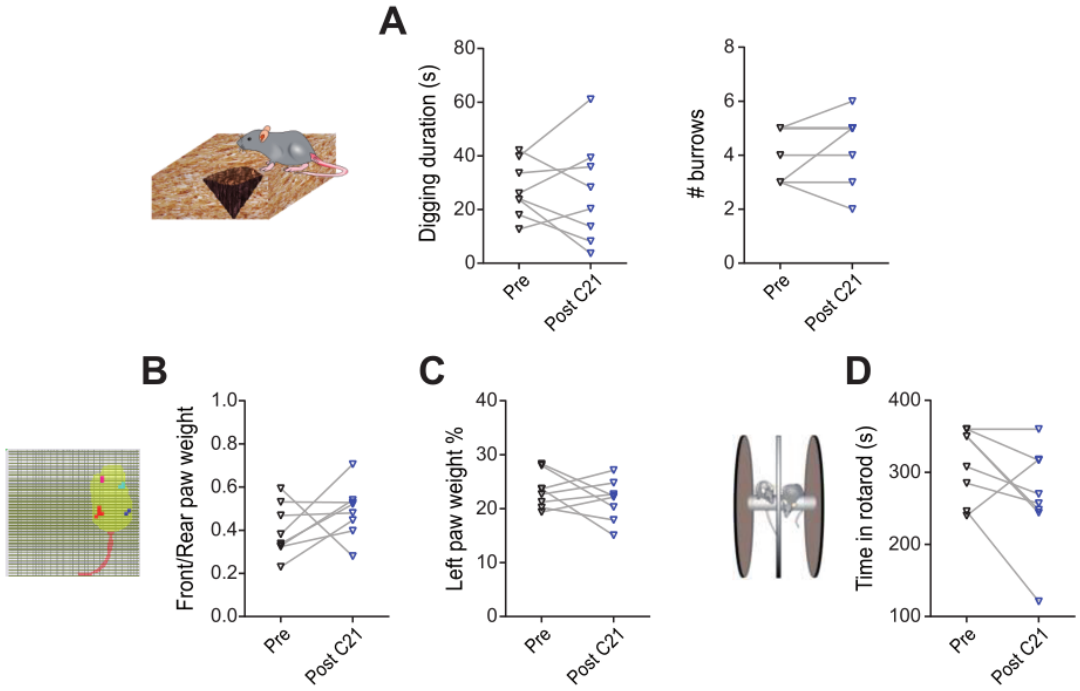

Fig. S2. No off target behavioral effects of C21. Digging duration and number of burrows (A), ratio of front and rear paw weight (B), rear left paw weight expressed as a percent of body weight (C), and time on rotarod (D) measured before (black) and after (blue) C21 administration in mice with no virus injections. Data obtained from 4 female and 4 male mice.

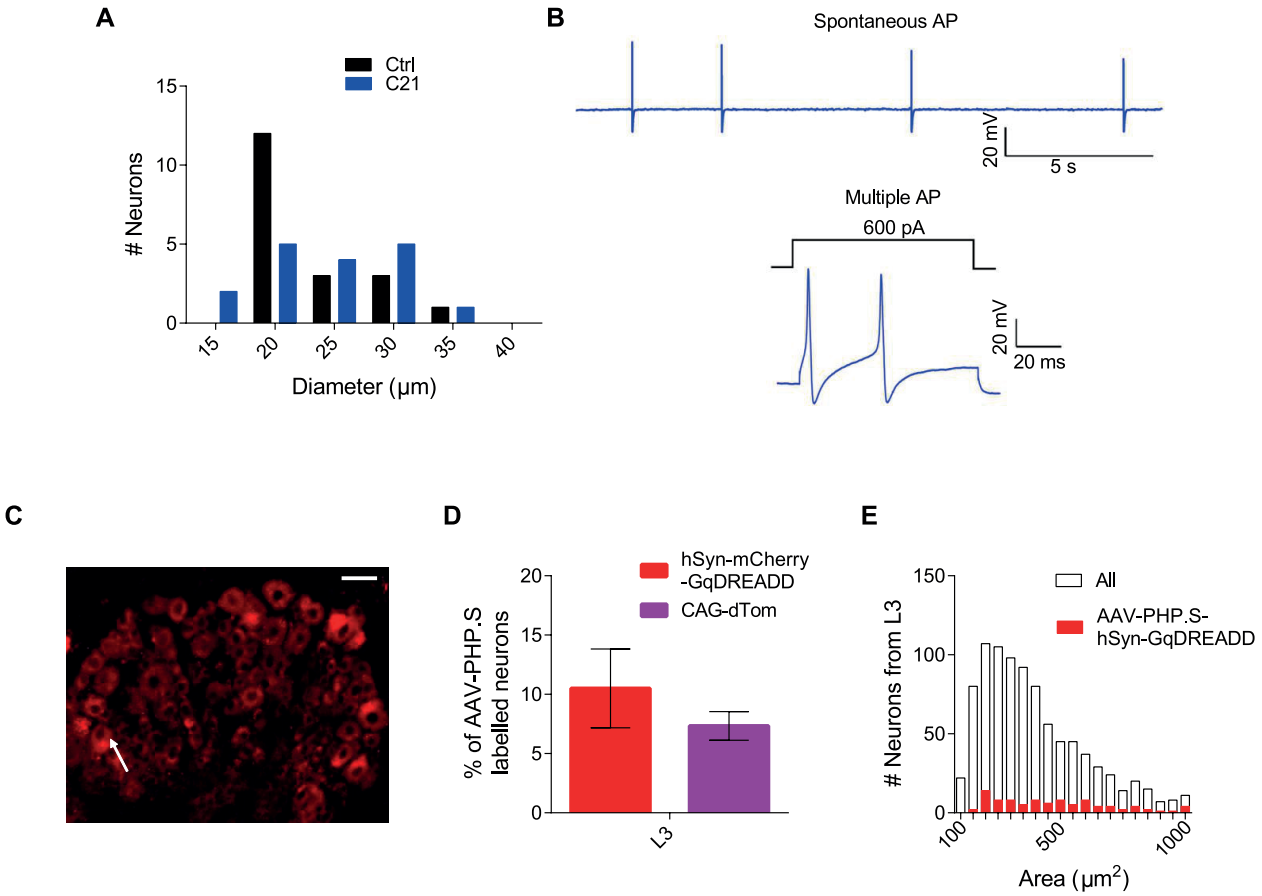

Fig. S3. Profile of neurons transduced using AAV-PHP.S-hSyn-G_qDREADD.

A) Distribution of neuronal diameters transduced by GqDREADD and characterized using whole cell patch clamp electrophysiology. Data from 3 female and 2 male mice B) Representative traces of spontaneous and multiple firing of AP after C21 activation. C) Representative DRG (L3) section showing AAV-PHP.S-hSyn-G_qDREADD labelled neuron (white arrow), scale bar = 50 µm. D) Percentage of labelled L3 neurons observed after AAV-PHP.S-hSyn-G_qDREADD injection (data from 2 female and 2 male mice) compared to AAV-PHP.S-CAG-dTomato (data replotted from Fig 1). E) Histograms showing size distribution of L3 DRG neurons stained with AAV-PHP.S-hSyn-G_qDREADD (n = 951, 3 female and 2 male mice).

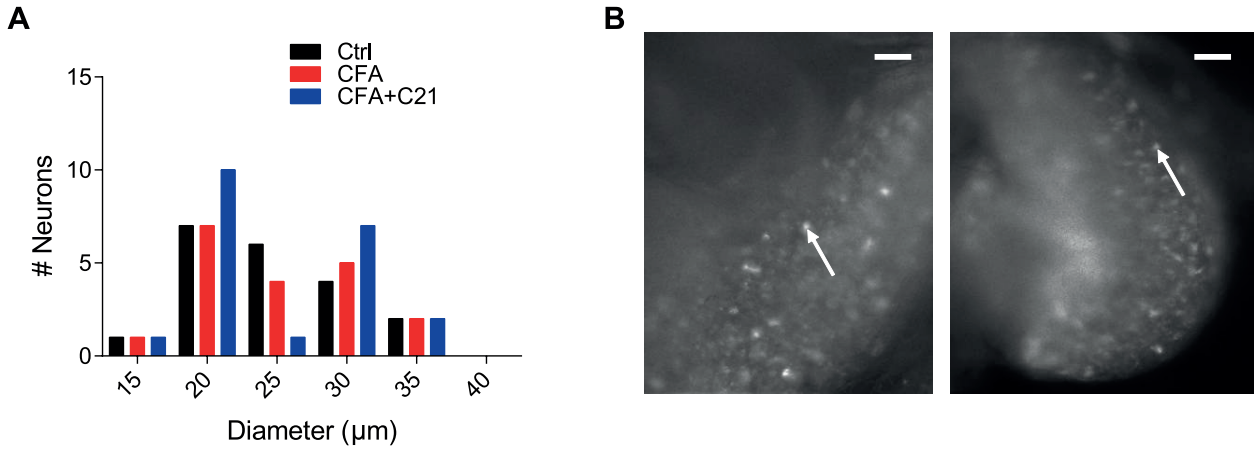

Fig S4. Post-hoc validation and neuronal profile of AAV-PHP.S-hSyn-G_iDREADD transduced neurons. A) Distribution of neuronal diameters transduced by G_iDREADD and characterized using whole cell patch clamp electrophysiology. Data from 2 female and 2 male mice B) Representative image of freshly dissected L3 DRG (left panel = CFA injected side, right panel = contralateral side) showing AAV-PHP.S-hSyn-G_iDREADD labelled neuron (white arrows), scale bar = 250 µm

Table S1: Plasmids used for virus packaging.

Plasmids	Addgene #	Acknowledgement
pAAV-hSyn-hM4D(Gi)-mCherry	50475	Bryan Roth
pAAV-hSyn-hM3D(Gq)-mCherry	50474	Bryan Roth
pUCmini-iCAP-PHP.S	103006	Viviana Gradinaru