

## GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors (version 2019.4) in the IUPHAR/BPS Guide to Pharmacology Database

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### Abstract

The GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor is a ligand-gated ion channel of the Cys-loop family that includes the nicotinic acetylcholine, 5-HT<sub>3</sub> and strychnine-sensitive glycine receptors. GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor-mediated inhibition within the CNS occurs by fast synaptic transmission, sustained tonic inhibition and temporally intermediate events that have been termed 'GABA<sub>A</sub>, slow' [41]. GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors exist as pentamers of 4TM subunits that form an intrinsic anion selective channel. Sequences of six  $\alpha$ , three  $\beta$ , three  $\gamma$ , one  $\delta$ , three  $\rho$ , one  $\epsilon$ , one  $\pi$  and one  $\theta$  GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor subunits have been reported in mammals [273, 232, 231, 278]. The  $\pi$ -subunit is restricted to reproductive tissue. Alternatively spliced versions of many subunits exist (e.g.  $\alpha$ 4- and  $\alpha$ 6- (both not functional)  $\alpha$ 5-,  $\beta$ 2-,  $\beta$ 3- and  $\gamma$ 2), along with RNA editing of the  $\alpha$ 3 subunit [67]. The three  $\rho$ -subunits, ( $\rho$ 1-3) function as either homo- or hetero-oligomeric assemblies [354, 46]. Receptors formed from  $\rho$ -subunits, because of their distinctive pharmacology that includes insensitivity to bicuculline, benzodiazepines and barbiturates, have sometimes been termed GABA<sub>C</sub> receptors [354], **but they are classified as GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors by NC-IUPHAR on the basis of structural and functional criteria [14, 232, 231].**

Many GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor subtypes contain  $\alpha$ -,  $\beta$ - and  $\gamma$ -subunits with the likely stoichiometry 2 $\alpha$ .2 $\beta$ .1 $\gamma$  [164, 232]. It is thought that the majority of GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors harbour a single type of  $\alpha$ - and  $\beta$ -subunit variant. The  $\alpha$ 1 $\beta$ 2 $\gamma$ 2 hetero-oligomer constitutes the largest population of GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors in the CNS, followed by the  $\alpha$ 2 $\beta$ 3 $\gamma$ 2 and  $\alpha$ 3 $\beta$ 3 $\gamma$ 2 isoforms. Receptors that incorporate the  $\alpha$ 4-  $\alpha$ 5- or  $\alpha$ 6-subunit, or the  $\beta$ 1-,  $\gamma$ 1-,  $\gamma$ 3-,  $\delta$ -,  $\epsilon$ - and  $\theta$ -subunits, are less numerous, but they may nonetheless serve important functions. For example, extrasynaptically located receptors that contain  $\alpha$ 6- and  $\delta$ -subunits in cerebellar granule cells, or an  $\alpha$ 4- and  $\delta$ -subunit in dentate gyrus granule cells and thalamic neurones, mediate a tonic current that is important for neuronal excitability in response to ambient concentrations of GABA [205, 268, 79, 17, 283]. GABA binding occurs at the  $\beta$ +/ $\alpha$ - subunit interface and the homologous  $\gamma$ +/ $\alpha$ - subunits interface creates the benzodiazepine site. A second site for benzodiazepine binding has recently been postulated to occur at the  $\alpha$ +/ $\beta$ - interface ([250]; reviewed by [277]). The particular  $\alpha$ - and  $\gamma$ -subunit isoforms exhibit marked effects on recognition and/or efficacy at the benzodiazepine site. Thus, receptors incorporating either  $\alpha$ 4- or  $\alpha$ 6-subunits are not recognised by 'classical' benzodiazepines, such as flunitrazepam (but see [351]). The trafficking, cell surface expression, internalisation and function of GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors and their subunits are discussed in detail in several recent

reviews [48, 136, 184, 311] but one point worthy of note is that receptors incorporating the  $\gamma 2$  subunit (except when associated with  $\alpha 5$ ) cluster at the postsynaptic membrane (but may distribute dynamically between synaptic and extrasynaptic locations), whereas as those incorporating the  $\delta$  subunit appear to be exclusively extrasynaptic.

**NC-IUPHAR** [14, 232] class the GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors according to their subunit structure, pharmacology and receptor function. Currently, eleven native GABA<sub>A</sub> receptors are classed as conclusively identified (*i.e.*,  $\alpha 1\beta 2\gamma 2$ ,  $\alpha 1\beta \gamma 2$ ,  $\alpha 3\beta \gamma 2$ ,  $\alpha 4\beta \gamma 2$ ,  $\alpha 4\beta 2\delta$ ,  $\alpha 4\beta 3\delta$ ,  $\alpha 5\beta \gamma 2$ ,  $\alpha 6\beta \gamma 2$ ,  $\alpha 6\beta 2\delta$ ,  $\alpha 6\beta 3\delta$  and  $\rho$ ) with further receptor isoforms occurring with high probability, or only tentatively [232, 231]. It is beyond the scope of this Guide to discuss the pharmacology of individual GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor isoforms in detail; such information can be gleaned in the reviews [14, 91, 164, 169, 140, 273, 212, 232, 231] and [8, 7]. Agents that discriminate between  $\alpha$ -subunit isoforms are noted in the table and additional agents that demonstrate selectivity between receptor isoforms, for example via  $\beta$ -subunit selectivity, are indicated in the text below. The distinctive agonist and antagonist pharmacology of  $\rho$  receptors is summarised in the table and additional aspects are reviewed in [354, 46, 141, 219].

Several high-resolution cryo-electron microscopy structures have been described in which the full-length human  $\alpha 1\beta 3\gamma 2L$  GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor in lipid nanodiscs is bound to the channel-blocker picrotoxin, the competitive antagonist bicuculline, the agonist GABA ( $\gamma$ -aminobutyric acid), and the classical benzodiazepines alprazolam and diazepam [194].

## Contents

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GABA<sub>A</sub> receptor  $\rho$ 3 subunit

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