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Trpv5/6 is vital for epithelial calcium uptake and bone formation

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ABSTRACT Calcium is an essential ion serving a multitude of physiological roles. Aside from its role as a second messenger, it is an essential component of the vertebrate bone matrix. Efficient uptake and storage of calcium are therefore indispensable for all vertebrates. Transient receptor potential family, vanilloid type (TRPV)5 and TRPV6 channels are known players in transcellular calcium uptake, but the exact contribution of this pathway is unclear. We used forward genetic screening in zebrafish (Danio rerio) to identify genes essential in bone formation and identified a lethal mutant channel is not. Taken together, this study provides both genetic and functional evidence that transcellular epithelial calcium uptake is vital to sustain life and enable bone formation.—Vanoeveren, J., Janssens, A., Huitema, L. F. A., Hammond, C. L., Metz, J. R., Flik, G., Voets, T., Schulte-Merker, S. Trpv5/6 is vital for epithelial calcium uptake and bone formation. FASEB. J. 25, 000–000 (2011). www.fasebj.org

Calcium (Ca²⁺) is an essential ion that serves many physiological roles, both extra- and intracellularly. Carefully controlled intracellular Ca²⁺ concentrations are therefore indispensable to fulfill a range of biological functions, including muscle contraction, synaptic transmission, cell death, and many more (1, 2). In vertebrates, bone serves as an important Ca²⁺ store for systemic homeostasis, and plasma Ca²⁺ is in equilibrium with Ca²⁺-hydroxyapatites in the bone matrix (3). Since such a wide variety of processes depend on the availability of Ca²⁺, it is crucial that sufficient amounts of Ca²⁺ are taken up and the Ca²⁺ levels in body fluids are kept within a narrow concentration range (2–3 mM; ref. 4).

Terrestrial vertebrates acquire sufficient Ca²⁺ from ingested food, and the intestine therefore is the main site of uptake. There exist 2 Ca²⁺ uptake pathways: an energy-dependent transcellular pathway and a passive paracellular pathway (5). In the transcellular pathway, Ca²⁺ enters the enterocytes through the apical membrane via a Ca²⁺-permeable channel of the transient receptor potential family, vanilloid type (TRPV)6 (6). In the cytosol of the enterocyte, Ca²⁺ ions are readily complexed to Ca²⁺-buffering proteins like calbindin-D₉k (7). At the basal side of the epithelium, Ca²⁺ is actively extruded via plasma membrane Ca²⁺-ATPase 1 (PMCA1; ref. 8) and Na⁺/Ca²⁺ exchanger 1 (NCX1; ref. 9) and thus enters the blood and can be transported throughout the body. In addition, there exists a renal reabsorption pathway in which Ca²⁺ is taken up from the forming urine. Initial uptake in the kidney tubules occurs via TRPV5 (10), and basolateral transport is also achieved through NCX1 and PMCA1 (11). The paracellular route involves passive diffusion and mainly depends on Ca²⁺ concentration gradients and the tightness of the epithelium (12, 13). The molecular principles for transepithelial Ca²⁺ transport are highly conserved between fish and mammals (14), although their habitat is different; ambient water provides a sufficient source of Ca²⁺ (seawater: 10 mM; freshwater: 0.025–3.0 mM). In fish, Ca²⁺ is taken up mainly (~97%) by the gills, and chloride cells have long been recognized as the main cell type involved in this process.
(4, 15). These cells contain all molecular components (Trpv5/6, Pmcas, and Nxc-homologues) that are thought to play a role in transepithelial Ca\(^{2+}\) uptake (16), although their contribution has never been studied at the molecular level.

The transient receptor potential (TRP) family is a large protein family consisting of several subfamilies, of which the TRPV is an example. The TRPV family can be divided into 4 groups: TRPV1/2, TRPV3, TRPV4, and TRPV5/6 (reviewed in ref. 17). TRPV1–TRPV4 are nonselective cation channels that can be activated by a number of different stimuli, such as second-messenger binding, heat and cold, and chemical and/or mechanical stress (18, 19). These channels are modestly permeable for Ca\(^{2+}\), whereas the other 2 members of the family, TRPV5 and TRPV6, are highly selective for Ca\(^{2+}\) and tightly regulated by intracellular Ca\(^{2+}\) concentration (20–22).

An important question remaining in the field of epithelial Ca\(^{2+}\) transport concerns the exact contribution of the transcellular vs. the paracellular pathway (23, 24). Mouse single-knockout models for components of the transcellular pathway, Trpv5 and Trpv6, failed to answer this question due to functional redundancy and compensatory mechanisms by other genes and pathways regulating Ca\(^{2+}\) homeostasis, including parathyroid hormone- and vitamin D-dependent mechanisms (25, 26).

The vertebrate body contains a large pool of immobilized Ca\(^{2+}\) in the skeleton. Besides its role in Ca\(^{2+}\) storage, bones are important in supporting the vertebrate body, enabling movement by providing a matrix for the attachment of muscles and tendons and protection of important organs like the brain and heart (27). Skeletal homeostasis is established by balancing bone formation through the activity of osteoblasts and through bone resorption by osteoclasts, processes that exhibit a large extent of evolutionary conservation between fish and mammals (28). We used forward genetic screening in zebrafish to identify genes critically involved in bone formation and identified the single orthologue of mammalian TRPV5/6 as a main regulator of bone formation and transepithelial Ca\(^{2+}\) uptake, establishing an in vivo model for this essential physiological process.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Screening procedure**

Forward genetic screening was performed as described by Spoorendonk et al. (29).

**Molecular biology**

The cDNA encoding trpo5/6 was amplified from reverse-transcribed RNA and ligated into a pGEM-T easy (Promega, Madison, WI, USA) cloning vector. For expression in HEK293 cells, the ends of the cDNA were modified with appropriate restriction sites using PCR and ligated into the pCINeo/IRES-GFP vector.

**Meiotic mapping**

The matu-and-schlapp mutation was mapped to linkage group 16 using standard simple sequence length polymorphism (SSLP) mapping. Fine mapping was performed using custom repeat markers and single-nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs). Primer sequences are as follows: Rep12For 5'-TGGAGATTACGTAG-GTGCAAG/3', Rep12Rev 5'-CTGTGAAATTTGGCTTGC-3'; SNPAFor 5'-CCATCACGTGGTTTGACATG-3', SNPRev 5'-TGAAGGAACTGTTCCAAG-3'; and SNPFor 5'-TCTAUTGGTTGAAGGTCAA-3', SNPRev 5'-CACCAGTTCTTGTAATGTC-3'.

**Skeletal staining**

The protocol for bone and cartilage staining was adapted from Walker and Kimmel (30). Embryos were fixed in 3.5% formaldehyde and stored in 70% methanol at 4°C until further use. Embryos were partially dehydrated in 50% ethanol and stained with 0.2 mg/ml Alcian blue 8 GX (Sigma, St. Louis, MO, USA) in 70% ethanol containing 80 mM MgCl\(_2\). Next, embryos were bleached in 1% H\(_2\)O\(_2\)/1% KOH for 30 min, washed in a saturated sodium tetraborate solution, and digested for 1 h in 1 mg/ml trypsin (Sigma) in 60% sodium metaperiodate. Bone was stained with 0.04 mg/ml Alizarin red S (Sigma) in 1% KOH. Finally, specimens were dehydrated to 70% glycerol and stored at 4°C.

**In situ hybridization**

**In situ hybridization** was performed essentially as described previously (31, 32). Briefly, embryos were fixed in 4% paraformaldehyde in PBS, transferred to methanol, and rehydrated. Embryos were permeabilized by proteinase-K treatment in PBS + 0.1% Tween 20 (PBST). Embryos were prehydrized for 2 h at 68°C before overnight hybridization at 68°C in hybridization solution (50% formamide 5× SSC, 500 mg/ml yeast tRNA, 50 mg/ml heparin, 0.2% Tween 20, and 9.2 mM citric acid) containing digoxigenin-labeled antisense probes. Embryos were then washed in 2× SSCT (300 mM NaCl, 15 mM sodium citrate, and 0.1% Tween 20) and taken to 0.2 SSCT at 68°C. After graded changes to PBS, embryos were blocked for 2 h with Roche blocking reagent (Roche, Indianapolis, IN, USA) in PBS at 4°C and subsequently incubated overnight with blocking reagent containing antidiogenin antibodies labeled with alkaline phosphatase (Roche), diluted in blocking buffer. After being washed 6 times in PBST, embryos were transferred to alkaline phosphate buffer (100 mM Tris, 50 mM MgCl\(_2\), 100 mM NaCl, and 0.1% Tween 20), and staining was developed using nitroblue tetrazolium/5-bromo-4-chloro-3-indolyl phosphate. Primer sequences used to generate in situ probes were as follows: trpo5/6/3' probeFor 5'-GGGATCC-AATGAAATGTTGG-3', trpo5/6/5' probeRev 5'-GTGTTCATCGAG-GCTTGAGA/3'; Ste12For 5'-TGAAACATCTCTCCTGTTTGG-3', Ste12Rev 5'-TCGATATCCTGGAACTGC-3'; Ron2For 5'-GTCCTGACCTGGAACACT-3', Ron2Rev 5'-GCGGAGTCTTGCGAAGG-3'; and sparcFor 5'-GGACACCGTTTCGTAATGAC-3', sparcRev 5'-TCCGTCCTTACGCTGTCCTTCTG-3'.
Genotyping

Genomic DNA of single embryos was extracted and subjected to KASP SNP genotyping (KBiosciences, Hoddesdon, UK) using protocols described by the manufacturer. Primer sequences are as follows: ForwardSib 5’-GAAGTGGCCAGTCATGCTGTGATTGTTTGTCTCAGGGCCAGAA-3’, ForwardMut 5’-GAAGTGGCCAGTCATGCTGTGATTGTTTGTCTCAGGGCCAGAT-3’, and CommonReverse 5’-GATGAGCTGTCGGAACTGGAGTCAA-3’.

Ca²⁺ and phosphorous measurements

Mutant and sibling embryos were phenotyped and overanesthetized using MS-222, washed twice with deionized water, and dried overnight under vacuum. Ions were released with 60% nitric acid. Next, samples were diluted using deionized water and measured using atomic absorption spectrophotometry (Solaar; Thermo Elemental, Winsford, UK; ref. 33). Statistical significance was determined using Student’s t test.

Microscopy

In situ hybridizations were analyzed on a Zeiss Axiosplan microscope (Carl Zeiss, Göttingen, Germany) equipped with a Leica 480C camera (Leica, Wetzlar, Germany). For analyses in transgenic backgrounds, embryos were stained in vivo with Alizarin red, washed with E3 medium, anesthetized with MS-222, and embedded in 0.5% agarose. Images were captured on a Leica TCS-SPE confocal microscope. Intracellular Ca²⁺ imaging was performed using a Cell²M system (Olympus, Hamburg, Germany).

Transgenic lines

The oxstnuGFP line was generated as follows: the 4.1-kb upstream regulatory region of the medaka ossterix gene was amplified (34) and cloned in front of a nuclear localization signal followed by GFP (nuGFP). Transgenic zebrafish were generated using the Tol2 transposon system (35). An oxstGFP reporter line was generated by amplification of a 3.5-kb upstream regulatory region of the medaka osteocalcin gene and cloned in front of GFP (36).

Evaluation of heart rates

Embryos of 54 hours postfertilization (hpf) were anesthetized using MS-222 and transferred to 24-well plates and left to acclimatize for 30 min. Heart rates were counted over intervals of 20 s, and each embryo was evaluated 3 times before genotyping.

Cell culture and transfections

HEK-293 cells were grown in DMEM medium containing 10% (v/v) fetal calf serum, 2 mM l-glutamine, 2 U/ml penicillin, and 2 mg/ml streptomycin at 37°C in an incubator with 10% CO₂. They were transfected with the pCINeo/iresGFP/trp5/6 vector using TransIT-293 transfection reagent (Mirus, Madison, WI, USA), and electrophysiological recordings were performed 24 h later.

Intracellular Ca²⁺ imaging

Transfected cells were incubated with 2 μM fura-2 acetoxy-methyl ester for 30 min at 37°C. Intracellular Ca²⁺ concentration was monitored via the ratio of fluorescence measured on alternating illumination at 354 and 380 nm using an MT-10 illumination system and Cell²M software (Olympus).

Electrophysiology

Transfected cells were identified by their green fluorescence. Patch-clamp experiments were performed in the tight-seal whole-cell configuration using an EPC-9 patch-clamp amplifier and Pulse software (HEKA Electronics, Lambrecht, Germany). Patch pipettes had DC resistances of 2–4 MΩ when filled with intracellular solution (150 mM NaCl, 5 mM MgCl₂, 5 mM EGTA, and 10 mM HEPES, pH 7.4). Series resistances were between 3 and 10 MΩ and were compensated 60–80%. Currents were sampled at 10 kHz and filtered at 2.9 kHz using an 8-pole Bessel filter. The stimulation protocol consisted of a linear voltage ramp from −50 to +100 mV (in 400 ms), which was applied every 5 s. The divergent cation-free extracellular solutions contained 150 mM XCl [where X = Na⁺, K⁺, or N-methyl-d-glucamine (NMDG)] and 10 mM HEPES, titrated to pH 7.4 with XOH. Isotonic divergent cation solutions contained 100 mM XCl₂ (where X = Ca, Ba, or Mg) and 10 mM HEPES, titrated to pH 7.4 with X(OH)₂. For the anomalous mole fraction behavior, NaCl and CaCl₂ solutions were mixed. All experiments were performed at room temperature (20–22°C).

Ca²⁺ enrichment and depletion

Embryos were collected and transferred to modified E₃ medium (5 mM NaCl, 0.17 mM KCl, and 0.33 mM MgSO₄; ref. 37) supplemented with the indicated amounts of total Ca²⁺ and incubated at 28.5°C. Embryos were fixed at 7 days postfertilization (dpf) and processed for cartilage and bone staining.

RESULTS

Matt-und-schlapp phenotype

Matt-und-schlapp (German for “slack as a rag”) embryos completely lack ossification of the axial skeleton (Fig. 1A). They fail to inflate their swim bladder and die at 7–9 dpf. Analysis of the phenotype at 7 dpf revealed some phenotypic variability in terms of ossification (Fig. 1A). Mutants were scored as mild when they lacked ossification of the axial skeleton but possessed some normally ossified craniofacial elements such as cleithrum, opercle, parasphenoid, and the teeth on the fifth branchial arch. Mineralization of the teeth was reduced in the mild phenotype. Mutants were categorized as severe when all ossification was absent, except for the otoliths. Bright field images (Fig. 1A, insets) of the mutant embryos illustrate that the tip of the notochord is formed correctly, but ossification is absent. Otoliths (which are mineralized, nonbone structures) are present but remain smaller in size. All cartilage elements are present and indistinguishable between siblings and mutants.

Matt-und-schlapp encodes trpv5/6

Genome scan analysis linked the mutation to linkage group (LG) 16 (Fig. 1B). With the use of standard
SSLP mapping, the region of interest was reduced to 1 Mb using custom repeat markers. Finally, by identification of informative SNPs, the region was further reduced to an interval of 50 kb containing a single gene: *trpv5/6*, a member of the TRPV family (Fig. 1B). Sequencing of the *trpv5/6*-encoding cDNA in siblings and mutants revealed a single A to T nucleotide change resulting in a premature stop codon at position 304 (R304Stop) of the predicted protein (Fig. 1C).

**Figure 1.** Phenotypic description and mapping of *mus*. A) Bone (red) and cartilage (blue) staining of sibling and mutant embryos at 7 dpf. Top panels: ventral view of sibling, mild mutant, and severe mutant phenotypes, respectively. Bottom left and middle panels: embryos in side view. Bottom right panels: detail of the tip of the notochord. Key skeletal elements are indicated: ps, parasphenoid; op, opercle; th, teeth; oto, otoliths; tn, tip of the notochord; cl, cleithrum; cen, vertebral centrum. Scale bars = 100 μm. B) Overview of meiotic mapping strategy. Numbers indicate number of recombinants/number of mutant embryos and the genomic location (in Mb) according to the Ensemble zebrafish genome browser (Zv9). Markers Rep12 and Rep21 are flanking markers restricting the critical region to ~2 Mb. This region was narrowed further by single-embryo mapping using SNP markers. Markers Rep12 and SNPA demarcate a region of interest containing only 1 gene: *trpv5/6*. C) Sequencing of mutant and heterozygous cDNA. Causative mutation is identified as an A to T substitution resulting in an amino acid change of arginine (R) to a premature stop codon (R304Stop). D) Top: schematic depiction of the wild-type Trpv5/6 protein with putative functional domains indicated. Bottom position of the mutation resulting in a premature stop codon. E) Synteny of chromosome regions at the position of *trpv5/6* between zebrafish and human chromosomes. Numbers (Mb) represent the chromosomal positions of the respective genes. The order of a number of genes in the region is conserved between zebrafish LG16 and parts of human chromosome 7 and 12. Note the absence of a second isoform of *trpv5/6* in zebrafish. F) Phylogenetic analysis of TRPV5/6 genes in mammals: *Homo sapiens* (Hs) and *Mus musculus* (Mm); birds: *Gallus gallus* (Gg); amphibians: *Xenopus laevis* (Xl); and fish: *Takifugu rubripes* (Tr) and *Danio rerio* (Dr). Only mammals show 2 distinct TRPV5/6-genes; amphibians and fish genomes only contain 1 *trpv5/6* gene. Phylogenetic tree (guide tree) was constructed using the neighbor-joining method in Vector NTI (Invitrogen) and visualized using TreeView software.
**Characterization of trpv5/6**

The trpv5/6 gene is composed of 18 exons spanning 31 kb on LG16. The mutation muis\(^{235927}\) is located in exon 9. The resulting wild-type protein consists of 709 aa with a predicted molecular mass of 81.1 kDa (Fig. 1D). The mutated protein R304Stop results in a severely truncated protein containing only 303 of the predicted 709 aa and is lacking all putative transmembrane domains including the pore region (Fig. 1D). Mammalian genomes contain 2 genes coding for epithelial calcium channels (ECaCs), which were initially termed ECaC1 (or CaT2; ref. 10) and ECaC2 (CaT1; ref. 6) and later renamed TRPV5 and TRPV6, respectively. The zebrafish, amphibian, and avian genomes contain only one ECaC isoform (trpv5/6; Fig. 1E, F). Figure 1E shows a large degree of synteny in the region of trpv5/6 on LG16 of the zebrafish genome and chromosomes 12 and 7 of the human genome and illustrates the juxtaposed location of TRPV5 and TRPV6 in the human genome. No second homologue could be detected in zebrafish. Phylogenetic analysis further shows that mammalian TRPV5 and TRPV6 do not cluster together in the same groups, nor do the nonmammalian isoforms. This notion and the adjacent position of TRPV5 and TRPV6 on the same chromosome in mammals support the notion of a gene duplication event in mammals that occurred after the divergence of mammalian and other vertebrate TRPV5/6, which is in line with other phylogenetic studies comparing mammalian isoforms to other vertebrate species (38).

Trpv5/6 mRNA expression was first observed at 24 hpf in the epithelial layer covering the yolk sac and yolk extension (Fig. 2C). At later stages (4 dpf), expression was still present in the skin, but highest expression levels were in the branchial region where the gills will form (Fig. 2B). In mutant embryos, trpv5/6 expression was absent at 24 hpf (Fig. 2B) and severely reduced at later stages (4 dpf) when compared with siblings (Fig. 2C). Under standard rearing conditions (0.33 mM total Ca\(^{2+}\) in the E3 embryo medium; ref. 37), ~25% of the embryos from a heterozygous parental pair showed the phenotype, as predicted for a recessive mutation (Fig. 2A).

**Mutants have very low Ca\(^{2+}\) content and can be rescued by extracellular Ca\(^{2+}\)**

Since mammalian TRPV5 and TRPV6 are Ca\(^{2+}\)-selective channels involved in active Ca\(^{2+}\) reabsorption, we investigated the overall Ca\(^{2+}\) content in mutant vs. sibling embryos by atomic absorption spectrometry. Mutant embryos showed a reduction in Ca\(^{2+}\) content of 68% (8695 vs. 2732 ppb/mg protein; P<0.05) when compared with siblings (Fig. 3A). We also measured the phosphorous content of the same samples (Fig. 3B). Here, the difference was much smaller and not statistically significant (18%; 13,620 vs. 11,204 ppb/mg protein) but in line with the observed reduction of mineralized bone in the mutant embryos (Fig. 1A). To further test whether the mutants displayed systemic Ca\(^{2+}\) deficiency, we investigated the expression of stanniocalcin 1 (stc1), an antihypercalcaemic hormone secreted by the corpuscles of Stannius (39, 40), fish-specific endocrine organs involved in Ca\(^{2+}\) metabolism (40, 41). Stc1 expression was completely absent in mutant embryos (Fig. 3C) even though the corpuscles of Stannius were correctly formed, as indicated by ron2 expression. Ron2 is a tyrosine-receptor kinase expressed in the corpuscles of Stannius and pronephric ducts (Fig. 3D). As the reduced whole-body Ca\(^{2+}\) content was suggestive of a defect in Ca\(^{2+}\) uptake, we exposed mutant embryos to different concentrations of extracellular Ca\(^{2+}\), ranging from a minimal (nominally 10 μM total Ca\(^{2+}\)) or a standard amount (0.33 mM total Ca\(^{2+}\)) to a very high amount (25 mM total Ca\(^{2+}\); Fig. 2A). Under conditions of low-Ca\(^{2+}\) availability (10 μM), a mortality rate corresponding to the predicted fraction of mutant embryos (~25%) was observed. This shows that mutant embryos are hypersensitive to low Ca\(^{2+}\) availability. Under conditions of normal Ca\(^{2+}\) (0.33 mM; the concentration used under standard conditions), a substantial fraction of sibling embryos (40%) were rescued by Ca\(^{2+}\), but none of the mutant embryos were rescued by Ca\(^{2+}\). This was further supported by a substantially higher mortality rate (P<0.05) in mutant embryos than in sibling embryos when exposed to high levels of Ca\(^{2+}\) (25 mM; Fig. 2A).

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**Figure 2.** Phenotype dependence on Ca\(^{2+}\) and expression pattern. A) Distribution of the phenotypes in embryos grown in different extracellular Ca\(^{2+}\) concentrations. Same classification of mild and severe phenotypes as in Fig. 1A is used here. In standard growing conditions, the total extracellular Ca\(^{2+}\) concentration is 0.33 mM. Stacked bars represent the percentage of phenotypes from a total of 150 embryos/condition from 3 independent experiments. B, C) trpv5/6 mRNA expression pattern in sibling and mutant embryos using in situ hybridization at 24 hpf (B) and at 4 dpf (C).
rearing conditions), the predicted fraction of mutant phenotypes (~25%) was observed with an equal distribution between mild and severe phenotypes (Fig. 2A). At 25 mM Ca^{2+}, no mutant phenotypes were observed (Fig. 2A) but lethality past 7–9 dpf could not be overcome. Taken together, these results

**Figure 3.** Ca^{2+} deficiency and disturbed Ca^{2+} homeostasis in *mus* mutants. A) Quantification of Ca^{2+} content in mutant and sibling embryos at 6 dpf using atomic absorption spectrometry. Mutants contain significantly (P < 0.05) less Ca^{2+} when compared with siblings. Measurements are average values of 3 independent experiments measuring a total of 19 single embryos/condition. B) Determination of phosphorous content, as a measure for the amount of phosphate, at 6 dpf in sibling and mutant embryos using atomic absorption spectrometry. Phosphorous content is only modestly lower (not significant) in mutants. This difference is attributed to the presence of less bone in the mutants. Same samples as in A were used. C) Expression of *stannioxin 1* (*stc1*) in embryos at 4 dpf using *in situ* hybridization. Insets: detailed view of expression in the corpuscles of Stannius. Scale bars = 100 μm. D) Expression of *ron2* in embryos at 4 dpf. Expression of *ron2* is present in both siblings and mutants indicating that the corpuscles of Stannius are formed correctly despite lacking *stc1* expression. Scale bar = 100 μm. E) Heart rates in a clutch of *mus* embryos. Average heart rates were counted in 48 anesthetized embryos at 54 hpf. Each embryo was evaluated 3 times before genotyping; n = number of embryos of each genotype that were evaluated. Statistical significance was determined using a Student’s *t* test. Values are depicted as average ± sd.
show that mutant embryos are hypersensitive to low-Ca\textsuperscript{2+} availability and can be rescued by high Ca\textsuperscript{2+} concentrations in the medium, indicating defects in Ca\textsuperscript{2+} uptake. We also tested whether other Ca\textsuperscript{2+}-dependent physiological processes are affected in mus mutants. Heart contraction was evaluated, and no difference between genotypes could be observed (Fig. 3E). Mutant embryos also still exhibited a touch response, indicating that skeletal muscles and the sensory system were functional. To address the question of whether the observed bone phenotypes are specifically due to nonfunctional Trpv5/6 channels or an effect secondary to Ca\textsuperscript{2+} deficiency, we repeated rearing wild-type embryos in different Ca\textsuperscript{2+} concentrations (Supplemental Fig. S1). When normal embryos were grown in low amounts (5 and 10 μM added Ca\textsuperscript{2+}) of extracellular Ca\textsuperscript{2+}, the same bone phenotypes were observed (Supplemental Fig. S1). Stel expression in wild-type embryos grown in low Ca\textsuperscript{2+} was also severely reduced (Supplemental Fig. S1G). Thus, the bone phenotype of mus embryos can be phenocopied in wild-type embryos by severely restricting the extracellular Ca\textsuperscript{2+} concentration. Taken together, these data support the notion that mus mutant embryos suffer from Ca\textsuperscript{2+} deficiency, which is primarily reflected by the absence of ossification of the axial skeleton, whereas other functions that highly depend on Ca\textsuperscript{2+} appear normal at least until d 7.

Mineralization is impaired in mus mutants while differentiated osteoblasts are present

To uncover whether the lack of ossification in mutant embryos was due to general Ca\textsuperscript{2+} deficiency or to a lack of osteoblast differentiation, we crossed the mus allele into transgenic reporter lines marking early (osx: nuGFP, ref. 34) and mature (osx:GFP) osteoblasts (36) respectively. Osterix expression in mutant embryos was indistinguishable from that in sibling embryos and corresponded to the ossified structures, as visualized by Alizarin red staining (Fig. 4A). Significantly, there was an absence of ossification of the tip of the notochord and the forming vertebrae in mutants, a hallmark of the mutant phenotype. As expected, the number of differentiated (osx-positive) osteoblasts was less than the amount of undifferentiated (osx-positive) osteoblasts, since osteoblast development is still in progress at this stage. Osterix expression indicates that spatially and temporally development of early osteoblasts takes place in mus mutants. Osteocalcin expression, however, was absent in mus mutant embryos (Fig. 4B). To show whether this lack of osteocalcin expression was due to lack of osteoblast differentiation or to dependence of osteocalcin expression on Ca\textsuperscript{2+} availability, we explored the expression of other late osteoblast markers (col1a2, col10a1) using in situ hybridization (Fig. 4C). The expression patterns of both col1a2 and col10a1 were indistinguishable between siblings and mutant em-

![Figure 4](image-url)

**Figure 4.** Osteoblast differentiation does occur in mus mutant embryos. Confocal imaging of transgenic osteoblast reporter lines in live zebrafish. A, B) Side view of sibling (top panels) and mus embryos (bottom panels) at 6 dpf. Green channel shows osx:nuGFP expression; red channel marks the ossified matrix stained with Alizarin red. A) Osterix expression in siblings and mus mutants is comparable, indicating the presence of early osteoblasts at sites of ossification in the craniofacial skeleton. Right panel shows an overlay of the fluorescence images with the bright field image. Insets: magnified view of the opercle. B) Osteocalcin is expressed in siblings in the cleithrum and opercle, sites where mineralization is first detected. In mus mutants, no osteocalcin expression is observed. Images are maximal projections from a series of confocal stacks of each embryo. At least 4 embryos/genotype were analyzed in at least 2 separate experiments. C) Expression of additional late osteoblast markers in sibling and mus embryos at 4 dpf. Two markers of differentiated osteoblasts, col1a2 and col10a1, were examined using in situ hybridization. Col1a2 and col10a1 expression is shown at the cleithrum, opercle, parasphenoid, teeth on the 5th branchial arch, and lower jaw, which are the first elements to be mineralized. Insets: details of the opercle showing col1a2 expression. No differences between sibling and mus embryos were detected. Expression patterns of 20–30 embryos of a single clutch were analyzed; embryos used for imaging were subsequently genotyped. Scale bars = 100 μm.
bryos; the elements that are first to mineralize showed the presence of differentiated osteoblasts: cleitrum, opercle, teeth on the fifth branchial arch, parasphe- noid, and Meckel’s cartilage. The expression pattern of an additional late osteoblast marker, sparc (osteonectin), also showed no difference in expression in mutant vs. sibling embryos (Supplemental Fig. S3). Since only the osteocalcin expression pattern was altered in the mutant embryos, we concluded that mature osteoblasts exist in mus mutant embryos and that osteocalcin expression is dependent on the availability of sufficient Ca2+, while expression of other markers is not.

**Trpv5/6 is a Ca2+-selective cation channel**

To investigate the characteristics of Trpv5/6, wild-type Trpv5/6 was expressed in HEK293 cells, a well-established overexpression host, and ion currents were recorded in whole-cell patch-clamp experiments. In divalent cation-free conditions with Na+ or K+ (150 mM) as the sole extracellular cation, we measured strongly inwardly rectifying currents that reversed around 0 mV, whereas no inward current could be measured when the large cation NMDG+ was the only extracellular cation (Fig. 5A). These data indicate that Trpv5/6 is an inwardly rectifying cation channel, permeable to Na+ and K+. In isotonic CaCl2 solution (100 mM), the reversal potential shifted toward positive potentials.

We also performed cytosolic Ca2+ measurements to directly show inward Ca2+ transport from the extracellular space to the cytosol via Trpv5/6 (Fig. 6). A concentration-dependent cytosolic response of Ca2+ on addition of increasing amounts of extracellular Ca2+ was observed (Fig. 6). Note that a large cytosolic response was already observed at concentrations <0.33 mM Ca2+, corresponding to the concentration used in normal E3 medium. This supports the view that Trpv5/6 is capable of epithelial Ca2+ uptake under physiological growth conditions.

**DISCUSSION**

The phenotype was termed *matt-and-schleppl*, referring to the loss of rigidity in the absence of an ossified vertebral column. The expression pattern of *trpv5/6* confirms the results of previous studies showing that expression in zebrafish commences at 24 hpf and becomes restricted to the skin and gill area (4). With the use of RT-PCR, however, expression of *trpv5/6* was shown in all tissues tested, with highest levels in gill, intestine, and kidney (4). In addition, these researchers showed that the number of *trpv5/6*-expressing cells is dependent on the extracellular Ca2+ concentration (4). Gill expression has also been shown for *trpv5/6* of other fish species (38). We show that levels of mRNA...
expression differ between siblings vs. mutants. At 24 hpf, there is no detectable trp5/6 expression in the mutants, while at 4 dpf, there is markedly less trp5/6 expression in mutant embryos, suggesting degradation of the mutant mRNA by nonsense-mediated decay (42).

The lack of stc1 expression is not surprising, since stc1 mRNA levels are regulated by extracellular Ca\(^{2+}\), and, in turn, trp5/6 expression is down-regulated when Ca\(^{2+}\) is present in sufficient amounts (40). Incubation of embryos in low Ca\(^{2+}\)-containing medium resulted in up-regulation of trp5/6 and down-regulation of stc1 (40), indicative of a tight relation among extracellular Ca\(^{2+}\), stc1, and trp5/6 expression. Mutant embryos experience Ca\(^{2+}\) deficiency since there is no functional trp5/6, which is (insufficiently) counteracted by down-regulation of the antihypercalcaemic hormone stc1.

The fact that the mutant phenotype is observed in the vertebral column is most likely due to developmental timing: vertebrae are formed relatively late in development. During early stages of development, there is sufficient Ca\(^{2+}\) present in the yolk (43), and embryos can take up Ca\(^{2+}\) in adequate amounts for initial growth and survival (44). These sources suffice to allow ossification in those structures that are first to ossify (3 dpf), like cleithrum and opercle. As development proceeds, there is an increasing need for Ca\(^{2+}\) (43) and trp5/6-independent mechanisms are not able to supply this amount. As a result, no bone is formed in structures that ossify later in development such as the tip of the notochord and the vertebrae.

Our data show that mus mutants suffer from general Ca\(^{2+}\) deficiency. Arguments for this notion are as follows: significantly reduced Ca\(^{2+}\) content, loss of stc1 expression, phenocopy in wild-type embryos by restricting Ca\(^{2+}\) availability, and hypersensitivity to low Ca\(^{2+}\) and rescue by high Ca\(^{2+}\). This phenotype strongly suggests the existence of a hierarchy in the use of Ca\(^{2+}\): the limited amount of Ca\(^{2+}\) that is present is used primarily to fulfill other essential cell biological functions such as muscle contraction and secretion at the expense of bone formation.

Skeletal defects have been reported in zebrafish mutants defective in other members of the TRP family. The touchstone/nutria allele (trpm7) shows growth retardation and alterations in skeletal development (45). In contrast, trpm7 mutations and subsequent disturbance in Ca\(^{2+}\) and Mg\(^{2+}\) homeostasis were found to be associated with elevated levels of stc1 (46). This is probably due to residual activity, since the allele is not a full loss of function. Furthermore, another TRP channel, TRPV4, has recently attracted significant attention since it was linked to human bone diseases (47, 48) and neurological disorders (49, 50).

Whereas mammalian TRPV5 and TRPV6 are very similar in their biophysical properties, they differ significantly in their sensitivity to block by RR, with IC\(_{50}\) values of 121 nM for TRPV5 compared with 9 \(\mu\)M for TRPV6 (51). We found that the RR sensitivity of zebrafish Trpv5/6 is more comparable to that of mammalian TRPV6, with an IC\(_{50}\) value of 4 \(\mu\)M. These results, combined with phylogenetic analysis in zebrafish and pufferfish (52) and the absence of a second isoform in fish, suggest that mammalian isoforms have evolved separately from the other vertebrates and the ancestral isoform probably resembled TRPV6 most and was duplicated as an adaptation to terrestrial life.

The mus phenotype is much more severe than the phenotypes observed for knockouts of its murine counterparts. Trpv5\(^{-/-}\) mice display reduced renal Ca\(^{2+}\) reabsorption resulting in hypercalciuria and show only mild disturbances in bone structures (26). Trpv5 was also described as essential for osteoclast function (53). Trpv6-deficient mice also show impaired Ca\(^{2+}\) homeostasis manifested as decreased intestinal Ca\(^{2+}\) absorption, poor weight gain, decreased bone mineral density, and reduced fertility (25). In addition, TRPV6 is involved in maternal-fetal Ca\(^{2+}\) transport (54). The mildness of phe-
otypes is best explained by redundancy and compensatory mechanisms: in Trpv5-knockout mice, loss of Ca\(^{2+}\) via the urine is compensated by TRPV6-mediated Ca\(^{2+}\) hyperabsorption in the intestine. On the other hand, Trpv5 up-regulation is not shown to occur in Trpv6-knockout mice, although compensatory hypercalcemic PTH and vitamin-D pathways are activated (23, 55). This indicates that TRPV6 is not essential for intestinal Ca\(^{2+}\) uptake, unless Ca\(^{2+}\) availability is restricted (56, 57). A double knockout cannot be generated by crossing both strains, since Trpv5 and Trpv6 are located adjacent to each other on the same chromosome. Targeted inactivation of the other known components of transcellular transport, Ncx1 and Pmca1, could not reveal their importance in transepithelial Ca\(^{2+}\) transport, since the respective knockout mice are not viable (58, 59). Our study shows that if the gatekeeper of the transcellular pathway is deficient, Ca\(^{2+}\) cannot be transported adequately to sustain life. The paracellular pathway or other processes cannot compensate for the loss of this essential component. Zebrafish are an attractive model for these studies since all molecular components are conserved, but they contain only 1 gatekeeper gene and have fewer compensatory mechanisms, resulting in a fully informative loss-of-function phenotype. In this study, we provide for the first time genetic and functional evidence for an essential role of Trpv5/6 in systemic Ca\(^{2+}\) uptake and bone formation. We show that in zebrafish, the transcellular uptake route for Ca\(^{2+}\) in the gills is the most important mechanism for Ca\(^{2+}\) uptake, and Trpv5/6 is a key molecular player in this process. Using electrophysiological techniques and Ca\(^{2+}\) imaging, we could demonstrate that Trpv5/6 is a highly Ca\(^{2+}\)-selective channel that allows Ca\(^{2+}\) influx under physiological conditions. In summary, this study shows for the first time an animal model lacking active transepithelial Ca\(^{2+}\) transport, indicating the essential role of this process to sustain life and enable bone formation. We further show that Trpv5/6 is an essential molecular player in this process. The mus zebrafish mutant line can therefore serve as an important screening tool for regulators of transepithelial Ca\(^{2+}\) uptake, bone density, and related disorders, such as osteoporosis.

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