Hydrogen Sulfide as a Third Essential Gas Molecule in Living Tissues

The data of foreign studies over the last 15 years devoted to endogenous synthesis and biological role of hydrogen sulfide in micromolar quantities which complemented the already two well-known gas transmitters — OH and NO are presented in this review. Despite the short period since the physiological properties of hydrogen sulfide were opened (about 20 years) it was found that this gas transmitter plays a key role in the regulation of nerve (neural signal transmission), cardiovascular (relaxation of smooth muscles), immune (anti-inflammatory and cytoprotective agent) sensory, gastrointestinal (output of insulin) systems and in the metabolism of various organs. Currently the role of H2S in the pathogenesis of different diseases, neurodegenerative diseases, diabetes, heart failure) is being studying. The developments of drugs that act as either exogenous donors H2S or blockers of the biosynthesis of H2S are promising. With consideration the fact that H2S is a representative of non-synaptic way of intercellular communication based on diffusion of molecules of inorganic compounds in the intercellular space in all directions and effect on distant from their place of formation non-synaptic receptors it is suggested to use exogenous H2S in strict proportion for the treatment of a number of human diseases.

Key words: gasotransmitters, hydrogen sulfide, biological effects, possible medical application.

(For citation: Kolesnikov S.I., Vlasov B.Ya., Kolesnikova L.I. Hydrogen as a Third Essential Gas Molecule in Living Tissues. Vestnik Rossiiskoi Akademii Meditsinskikh Nauk = Annals of...
Introduction

There are no doubt of existence, in addition to synaptic form of information transmission (from neuron to neuron or from neuron to effector cell), other means of information transmission, with the participation of gas molecules, such as nitric oxide (NO), carbon monoxide (CO), and most recently — hydrogen sulfide (H\textsubscript{2}S) [1]. These gaseous inorganic compounds, unlike other biologically active molecules, easy to penetrate through the membrane of any cells, do not bind with any receptor on the surface of cells and interact directly with intracellular proteins [2]. Among the so kind known metabolic regulators, so far H\textsubscript{2}S the least studied [3].

Direct studies of biological effects of hydrogen sulfide began at the turn of the 20th century, but they were devoted mainly to the study of the toxic properties of hydrogen sulfide [4], the toxicity of which 5 times higher than that of carbon monoxide (CO). H\textsubscript{2}S consider as a signaling molecule that not only is the toxic agent, but also participates in the regulation of functional activity of the various cells of the animal body, began only at the end XX century. Real start of research in this field put Japanese scientists K. Abe and H. Kimura, who in 1996 for the first time described the possibility of synthesis of H\textsubscript{2}S in the tissues of the brain and its ability to regulate cell functions [5].

Although hydrogen sulfide was detected in tissues of the brain in 1980s, initially it was considered to be an artifact forming due to the rapid increase in the concentration of sulfides in the tissues after death. This occurrence of H\textsubscript{2}S was associated with his release of disulfide compounds of Sulphur (so-called sulfone sulfur) during the preparation of the tissues [6].

Currently, hydrogen sulfide, as NO and CO assigned to the group of so-called gastransmitters — gaseous intracellular signaling molecules, performing in the cells specific regulatory functions. H\textsubscript{2}S is well soluble in lipophilic substances [1]. Its solubility in lipids is 5 times higher than the solubility in water, which makes a good penetration ability H\textsubscript{2}S through the cell membrane structures and does not require the participation of special ion transporting systems. Constant permeability (Pm) of hydrogen sulfide through bilayer lipid membranes is quite high - 0.5 ± 0.4 cm/s (for comparison, Pm for oxygen is approximately 0.0050 ± 0.0006 cm/s) [7]. This allows to consider hydrogen sulfide to be a highly available molecule effectively carrying out its functions inside cells. In human and animal organisms H\textsubscript{2}S high concentrations is presenting in the intestines due to bacteria, which utilizing
sulfates and sulfur-bearing amino acids (cysteine, methionine), as well as sulfur containing substances, polysaccharides and lipids [8]. H2S physiological concentration varies in different organs from 1 to 100 nmol/g of tissue [9]. At high concentrations (greater than 1.0 mg/l) a single inhalation of H2S can cause instant death [4].

**Biosynthesis of hydrogen sulfide**

Hydrogen sulfide intracellular synthesis is carrying out in different cells of the animal body. Currently known 3 enzyme, which activity participating in hydrogen sulfide synthesis: cystathionine-β-synthase (CBS) cistotionin-γ-liaza (CSE) and 3-merkaptopiruvat-sulfurtransferaza (3MST). The CBS carries out the H2S synthesis primarily in the nerve cells. In vascular smooth muscle cells (which contraction and relaxation alters the vascular tonus), hydrogen sulfide synthesis carries by CSE enzyme [10, 11] and in vessels inside endothelial cells lining — 3MST [12, 13].

All 3 enzymes using sulfur-containing amino acid (L)-cysteine as a substrate for the synthesis of hydrogen sulfide, catalyzing the reaction of cysteine desulfurhydration: cleavage of the sulfur atom from cysteine molecule without its subsequent oxidation, leading to the formation of H2S. CSE converts the cystine (cysteine disulfide) to thiocystein, pyruvic acid and ammonia followed by nonenzyme thiocystein conversion to cysteine and H2S. At the same time CBS uses a slightly different H2S pathway synthesis, which is the condensation of homocysteine with cysteine and subsequent formation of cystathionin [10]. As a substrate for the H2S synthesis could be used other sulfur-containing amino acids, such as methionine and cystine.

3MST enzyme operates in conjunction with other enzyme-cysteine amino transferase (CAT). There are two forms of CAT – cytosol and mitochondrial. Using sulfur-containing amino acid (L) -cysteine and ketoglutarate as a substrate, CAT produces 3-merkaptopiruvat (3MP) from which H2S synthesizing directly with participation of 3MST enzyme [14]. H2S synthesis terminates in the α-ketoglutarate absence.

**Biological effects of hydrogen sulfide**

H2S as the gastransmitter penetrates the cell membrane without the aid of specific transport molecules. Obtained from Na2S or NaHS in vitro hydrogen sulfide in micromole concentrations [15, 16] has cytoprotective properties that can be associated with its ability to neutralize various active forms of molecules (e.g., peroxy nitrites, hypochlorous acid and homocysteine). Effects of H2S is associated with modulation of intracellular kinases or caspase’s activity (p-38, c-JUN N-Terminal protein kinase 1/2, ERK1/2, PI3K), activation of
nuclear factor-kB and kB-dependent proteins (inducible NO-synthase, cyclo-oxigenase-2, intercellular adhesive molecule-1) as well as with the decline of antiapoptotic factor Bcl-2 [2].

H2S stimulates antioxidant system in the organism along with well-known antioxidants (including N-acetyl cysteine, glutathione and superoxide dismutase) and renders the cytoprotective effect [15]. Inhibition of H2S endogenous synthesis increases cytotoxic impact on the body's cells of exogenous H2S.

Endogenous H2S needed for protection of the kidneys from injury and dysfunction during ischemia/reperfusion and NaHS injection reduces the occurrence of dysregulation and morphological changes in kidney disease [2].

At the same time, the high H2S millimolar concentration have a cytotoxic effect on the cells, leading to activation of free radical processes, mobilization of calcium, use up of glutathione, intracellular release of iron, as well as the induction of cell death mitochondrial pathways.

H2S promotes the synthesis of cyclic AMP (cAMP) in neurons by activating the adenylate cyclase and cAMP-dependent reactions [17] contributes to the induction of LPT (amplification of signal transmission between neurons) in the hippocampus, in the central nervous system through (N)-methyl-b-aspartate-receptor (NMDA) activation [6], which govern the redox processes and participating in neurotransmission [18].

H2S increases intracellular concentration of Ca2+ [17] in astrocytes and glial cells. It can regulate synaptic activity by modulating the activity of neurons and glia [19]. An increase in extracellular potassium concentration in neurons activation leads to astrocytes depolarization and electrogenic cotransporters activation — sodium bicarbonate (Na+/HCO3−). Cotransporters activation leads to increasing astrocytes intracellular pH. As for other gasotransmitters, H2S has no selective receptor responsible for its biological effects.

Hemoproteins are key molecular subjects involved in gas transport, accumulation, interaction and indications of gases. They have a wide range of ligands, including CO [20], NO [21] and H2S [22]. Ligand linking with heme and dissociation of the complex form a competing ability between these gases.

Hemoproteins perform 4 main functions: transport, electron transport, oxidation-redox and sensory.

Hemoprotein transport function associating with the transport of oxygen by hemoglobin. Redox reactions occur in the catalytic sites of specific heme iron enzyme activating oxygen and forms the high valent status of enzymes that catalyze the reaction of oxygen-substrate, refer to oxygenase’s (for example, hemeoxygenase, NO-synthase). Heme
groups transfer signal to protein functional site. Representatives of these enzymes are CBS and guanilatcyclase. Guanilatcyclase inhibitors do not affect the ability of the H$_2$S to relax the blood vessels, so the action of H$_2$S does not depend on this enzyme. A covalently bounded with heme H$_2$S modulates hemecontaining enzymes [23].

The NO signaling mechanism is linked to the nitrozolation process – such modification, in which nitrozole group join proteins in posttranslational period. In addition to the process of S-nitrozolation there is another process of cysteine thiol modification — S-sulfhydration. By mass-spectrometric analysis determined that the accession of additional Sulfur to cysteine thiol groups (SH) leads to the hydropersulfide (SSH) formation. Thus, H$_2$S signal mechanism associated with sulfhydration [22].

Unlike S-thiolation process (formation of mixed disulfide protein with glutathione), which is blocking the thiol groups of proteins, S-sulfhydration process lead to the formation of SSH groups and increases the chemical reactivity. β-tubulin and glyceraldehyde-3-phosphate dehydrogenase are the examples of the basal sulfhydrated proteins. Their sulfhydration process is taking out at physiological levels of L-cysteine (0.6-1 μmol/l) with maximal stimulation. GAPDH nitrozolation reduces its catalytic activity, whereas H$_2$S, synthesized from L-cysteine with CSE, increases its activity. In addition, sulfhydration promotes actin polymerization, at the same time not affecting its depolymerization of [22].

H$_2$S hampers neutrophil leucocytes apoptosis by inhibiting protein p38 Caspase 3 [22]. The H$_2$S ions prolong the lifetime of granulocytes (with the exception of lymphocytes and acidophilic granulocytes) and also neutrophils, and preventing the development of new one, thus accelerating the inflammatory processes course. H$_2$S participates in metabolic reactions which results in appearance of per- and polysulfides. Sulfide linking to with Hem- or Myoglobin leads to the formation of sulfhemoglobin or sulfmyoglobin. H$_2$S regulates the cellular signal transduction pathways [24], leading to changes of the expression of different genes and their products, including thioredoxin reductase and Interleukin 1β.

Reduced H$_2$S synthesis was demonstrated in vessels during experimentally generated hypoxia (by NO-synthase blockade), as well as with pulmonary hypertension in spontaneously hypertensive rats. Induced exogenous donor H$_2$S caused pronounced significant therapeutic effects in these model objects.

Numerous studies have shown that one of the systems where hydrogen sulfide plays a key role as a signaling molecule is the cardiovascular system is the blood vessels in particular. Its regulatory action in the vessels of the arterial bed shows its active participation in the regulation of blood pressure [25–28].
It was shown that a group of people with normal blood pressure had blood plasma \( \text{H}_2\text{S} \) concentration rates approximately 34 µm, whereas in patients with arterial hypertension its concentration has been reduced to 20 µm. Inhalation of hydrogen sulfide by patients with arterial hypertension contributed to blood pressure reducing [29]. Research on rats found that intravenous injection of hydrogen sulfide solution caused dose-dependent blood pressure decreasing [10].

In in vitro conditions sodium hydrosulfide (NaHS) as a hydrogen sulfide donor actively used in the experiments, also caused of the various divisions of arterial and venous system relaxation: thoracic, mesenteric, renal artery, aorta, portal vein, etc. Despite the significant role of endothelium in the regulation of vascular tone, its removal does not have a significant impact on the effects of hydrogen sulfide in smooth muscle cells [10]. This shows the influence of hydrogen sulfide on live smooth muscle cells through inherent regulatory mechanisms. Relaxing effect of hydrogen sulfide on smooth muscle cells predominantly associated with opening the special structures in their membrane-potassium channels, sensitive to the concentration of intracellular energy source-adenosine triphosphate (ATP) [30, 31].

Communicating with these channels proteins sulfur groups hydrogen sulfide alters their spatial configuration and thus contributes to the opening of channels [13, 20, 32]. Opening of potassium channels leads to an increase in output of potassium ions out of the cell into the intercellular space. At the same time, activation of ATP-sensitive potassium channels accompanied by the inactivation potential sensitive L-type local calcium channels, ensuring the flow of calcium ions (Ca\(^{2+}\)) in the cell. High intracellular concentration of Ca\(^{2+}\) is a necessary condition for the development of contractile response of the smooth muscle cell. Closing of calcium channels contributes to the reduction of the concentration of free intracellular Ca\(^{2+}\) [29]. These processes combine to trigger mechanisms of relaxation in smooth muscle cells, which ultimately leads to lower the tone of the blood vessels and blood pressure in general [33, 34].

**Conclusion**

These data demonstrate \( \text{H}_2\text{S} \) important role in the processes of intracellular metabolism and fundamental cellular processes controlling. Summing up, it should be noted that this signal molecule plays an important role in the regulation of nerve (neural processes of signal transduction), cardiovascular (relaxation of smooth muscle), immune (anti-inflammatory and cytoprotective agent), sensory, gastrointestinal (output of insulin), as well as the metabolism in various organs. Current studies revealed \( \text{H}_2\text{S} \) important role in the
pathogenesis of various diseases (neurodegenerative diseases, diabetes, congestive heart failure) [13]. It is highly promising designing and development of drugs, which act either as exogenous donors H2S, or either blocking the biosynthesis of H2S [31].

In view of the fact that the H2S is a representative of the non-synaptic way of intercellular communication, diffusion-based molecules of inorganic compounds on the moist space in all directions and distant from non-synaptic receptors place of formation, it is important strictly dosed exogenous H2S use for the treatment of diseases of animals and humans [2, 19, 35–38].

Source of funding

This work was supported by the grant provided by President's Council (No. HIII-5646.2014.7).

Conflict of interest

The authors have indicated they have no financial support / conflict of interest relevant to this article to disclose.

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