

MOL#78683

Title page

**Efficient binding of 4/7 α -conotoxins to nicotinic $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptors is prevented by
R185 and P195 in the $\alpha 4$ subunit**

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MOL#78683

Running Title Page

Running title: *α -conotoxin binding to $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptors*

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Number of words

Abstract 163

Introduction 452

Discussion 1118

Abbreviations: ACh, acetylcholine; AChBP, acetylcholine binding protein; EM, electron microscopy; HEPES, 2-(4-(2-Hydroxyethyl)-1-piperazinyl)-ethansulfonsäure; LBD, ligand binding domain; MD, molecular dynamics; nAChR, nicotinic acetylcholine receptor; rmsd, root mean square deviation; TEVC, two-electrode voltage-clamp

MOL#78683

Abstract

α -Conotoxins are subtype-selective nAChR antagonists. While potent $\alpha 3\beta 2$ nAChR-selective α -conotoxins have been identified, currently characterized α -conotoxins show no or only weak affinity for $\alpha 4\beta 2$ nAChRs, which are besides $\alpha 7$ receptors the most abundant nAChRs in the mammalian brain. To identify the determinants responsible for this difference, we substituted selected amino acid residues in the ligand binding domain of the $\alpha 4$ subunit by the corresponding residues in the $\alpha 3$ subunit. Two-electrode voltage-clamp analysis of these mutants revealed increased affinity of α -conotoxins MII, TxIA, and [A10L]TxIA at the $\alpha 4(R185I)\beta 2$ receptor. Conversely, α -conotoxin potency was reduced at the reverse $\alpha 3(I186R)\beta 2$ mutant. Replacement of $\alpha 4R185$ by alanine, glutamate, and lysine demonstrated that a positive charge in this position prevents α -conotoxin binding. Combination of the R185I mutation with a P195Q mutation outside the binding site but in loop C completely transferred high α -conotoxin potency to the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor. Molecular dynamics simulations of homology models with docked α -conotoxin indicate that these residues control access to the α -conotoxin binding site.

MOL#78683

Introduction

Neuronal nicotinic acetylcholine receptors (nAChRs) constitute a diverse family of pentameric ion channels that are formed by variable assembly from at least eight α - and three β -subunits ($\alpha 2$ - $\alpha 6$, $\alpha 7$, $\alpha 9$, $\alpha 10$, and $\beta 2$ - $\beta 4$). The $\alpha 2$, $\alpha 3$, $\alpha 4$, and $\alpha 6$ subunits require coexpression of at least one β ($\beta 2$ or $\beta 4$) subunit to form functional channels. The ACh binding site has been located at the interface between an α -subunit (+face) and an adjacent β subunit (– face), or, in the case of the $\alpha 7$, $\alpha 9$, and $\alpha 10$ subunits, another α subunit (–face). The "structural" $\alpha 5$ and $\beta 3$ subunits appear unable to form functional channels in any pairwise combination but contribute to the diversity of pentameric $\alpha\beta$ combinations in channels with three or four different subunits (Gotti et al., 2009).

The nicotinic $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$ subtype (* denotes the possible presence of additional subunits) is the most abundant heteromeric nicotinic receptor in the brain. It plays a role in cognitive processes and represents a therapeutic target for smoking cessation as well as for the treatment of pain and a variety of neurological disorders such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, depression, and attention deficit disorders (Taly et al., 2009). α -Conotoxins, a family of small disulfide peptides isolated from the venom of predatory marine snails, are highly selective nAChR antagonists that bind at the intersubunit agonist binding site and thereby discriminate between closely related nAChR subtypes. They have proven to be useful pharmacological tools to localize nAChR subtypes and to investigate their specific subunit composition and physiological functions (Nicke et al., 2004). The 4/7 α -conotoxins represent the largest α -conotoxin subfamily. Most of the identified 4/7 α -conotoxins target $\alpha 7$ and/or $\alpha 3\beta 2^*$ nAChRs with low nanomolar potency. Equally potent 4/7 α -conotoxins with selectivity for the $\alpha 6\beta 2$ receptor (which is

MOL#78683

closely related to the $\alpha 3\beta 2$ subtype) have been isolated from crude venom or have been generated by modification of the $\alpha 3\beta 2$ - and $\alpha 6\beta 2$ -selective α -conotoxin MII (Nicke et al., 2004; Azam and McIntosh, 2009). So far, no conotoxin has been identified that selectively targets $\alpha 4\beta 2$ nAChRs and only a few α -conotoxins, MII (Cartier et al., 1996), GID (Nicke et al., 2003), GIC (McIntosh et al., 2002), and AnIB (Loughnan et al., 2004), have been shown to block this receptor at all, although at high nanomolar or micromolar concentrations.

Given the abundance of $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$ receptors in the brain and their importance as drug targets, potent and specific pharmacological tools for this receptor are needed. Here we show that an arginine residue in position 185 and a proline residue in position 195 of the $\alpha 4$ subunit prevent efficient α -conotoxin binding. Our data provide molecular determinants of subtype selectivity and thus represent a basis for the design of optimized α -conotoxins with tailored subtype selectivity.

Material and Methods

Homology modelling and molecular dynamics simulations – The dimeric homology model of the ligand-binding domain (LDB) of the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ nAChRs was based on the muscle-type nAChR (Unwin, 2005). This model was generated with Modeller9v8-1 (Sali and Blundell, 1993) using two alpha subunits of the refined EM structure of the *Torpedo marmorata* nAChR polypeptide chains (pdb code 2BG9). These show a considerably higher homology to the $\alpha 4$ - and $\beta 2$ nAChR subunits than that of the AChBP. Although the structural assignment might be critical due to the resolution of only 4 Å of 2BG9, a recently published structure of the Glu-gated chloride channel GluCl (3.3 Å, pdb code

MOL#78683

3RIF) (Hibbs & Gouaux, 2011) and the common alignment of the loop C region support its reliability. For a comparison of this models with a previously generated AChBP-based model in terms of structural changes of loop C (rmsd), see Supplemental Fig.2.

Because we intended to measure binding energies of conotoxins, which correlate with their ability to inhibit AChRs and not gating movements, we decided to restrict to a dimeric model for docking and MD studies instead of using a full receptor or LBD model. This was also more feasible in terms of simulation times needed for statistical analysis. All molecular dynamics (MD) simulations were performed using Gromacs (version 4.0.7 and 4.5.5) (Hess et al., 2008) and the amber03 force field (Duan et al., 2003). Dimeric wild-type and mutant $\alpha 4\beta 2$ ligand binding domains with α -conotoxin [A10L]TxIA were generated with the capping groups ace and nme (Sybyl 8.0.1, Tripos St Louis, MO, USA). The proteins were placed in a rectangular box filled with tip4p water (Mahoney and Jorgensen, 2000) and Na^+ and Cl^- ions (0.15 M) and, after energy minimization, subjected to 50 ns MD runs whereby position restraints of 10 kJ/(mol*nm²) were set on the protein atoms (without H) except for loop C (Y182-I197) and the conotoxin. From the resulting trajectories distances and binding energies (sum of short range Coulomb and Lennard-Jones energies) of the α -conotoxin to the $\alpha 4$ and $\beta 2$ subunits, respectively were calculated. For this purpose, from each trajectory 20.000 frames (10-50 ns) were used for analysis. The first 10 ns from each trajectory were discarded to minimize equilibration effects. For each value, 8 to 10 trajectories were generated, and distances and interaction energies were averaged (Fig. 5). To determine the significance of the overall trend for stronger binding enthalpies for $0 < 1 < 2 < 3$, a Bayesian analysis (see supplemental information) for linear fit functions $y = m * x + b$ was

MOL#78683

carried out with $x=[0,1,2,3]$ for [wt, P195Q, R185I, P195Q/R185I], respectively, assuming an unbiased a priori distribution for the slope m and the offset b . For the resulting a posteriori probability distribution $p(m)$, integrated over all offsets, a probability of 0.9986 is found for negative m , implying a significance level of 0.14%.

Peptide sources – α -MII was obtained from Tocris. α -TxIA and α -[A10L]TxIA were synthesized using Boc chemistry with in situ neutralization protocols as previously described (Dutertre et al., 2007).

Electrophysiological measurements – nAChR cDNAs were provided by J. Patrick (Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, TX, USA) and subcloned into the oocyte expression vector pNKS2. Site-directed mutagenesis was performed with the QuikChange mutagenesis Kit (Stratagene, La Jolla, CA, USA). Primer synthesis and sequencing was performed by MWG Biotech AG (Ebersberg, Germany). cRNA was synthesized with the SP6 mMessage mMachine kit (Ambion, Austin, TX, USA) and *Xenopus laevis* (Nasco International, Fort Atkinson, WI, USA) oocytes were injected with 50 nl aliquots of cRNA (0.5 mg/ml), either manually or using the Roboinject robot (MCS, Reutlingen, Germany). nAChR subunits were mixed in the ratios 1:1 (α 3: β 2) or 5:1 (α 4: β 2).

Antagonist dose response curves were measured as described (Dutertre et al., 2005) in ND96 (96 mM NaCl, 2 mM KCl, 1 mM CaCl₂, 1 mM MgCl₂, and 5 mM Hepes at pH 7.4). Shortly, current responses to acetylcholine were recorded at -70 mV using a Turbo Tec 05X Amplifier (NPI Electronic, Tamm, Germany) and Cell Works software. A standard concentrations of 100 μ M ACh was used to keep the data comparable with

MOL#78683

previous studies. However, comparison of the inhibition of the $\alpha 3\beta 2$ subtype by 3 nM [A10L]TxIA at 30, 100, and 300 μM ($\sim\text{EC}_{50}$ for wild-type $\alpha 3\beta 2$) ACh showed no significant differences in the toxin effect suggesting that the ACh concentration is not critical under the described conditions (preapplication of toxin). A fast and reproducible solution exchange (< 300 ms) was achieved with a 50 μl funnel-shaped oocyte chamber combined with a fast solution flow (~ 150 $\mu\text{l/s}$) fed through a custom-made manifold mounted immediately above the oocyte. Agonist pulses were applied for 2 s at 4 min intervals. Peptides were applied for three minutes in a static bath. IC_{50} values were calculated from a non-linear fit of the Hill equation to the data (Prism GraphPad v 4.0, San Diego, CA). Data are presented as mean \pm S.E. from at least 4 experiments.

Agonist dose response curves for ACh were recorded in Ca^{2+} -free Buffer (96 mM NaCl, 2 mM KCl, 1 mM MgSO_4 , 5 mM HEPES, pH 7.4), supplemented with 0.5 μM Atropine, using the Roboocyte platform (MCS, Reutlingen, Germany (Leisgen et al., 2007)) (Pehl et al., 2004) or the conventional TEVC set up described above. Oocytes were clamped at -60 or -70 mV. 2 or 3 second pulses of the indicated agonist concentrations were applied in alternation with a 200 (Robocyte) or 300 μM reference concentration to account for receptor run down. Current responses to ACh were calculated in relation to the reference pulses and the normalized dose response data were fitted to the 4 parametric Hill equation using Prism GraphPad. In cases where the Hill coefficient could not be accurately determined, it was constrained to a range from 0 to 2.

MOL#78683

Results

Generation and functional expression of mutant $\alpha 4\beta 2$ nAChRs – The $\alpha 4$ and $\alpha 3$ nAChR subunits have 61.84 % sequence identity in their ligand binding domain. From the sequence alignment of these two sequences (Fig. 1), we selected four amino acid residues located in the proposed conotoxin binding site that differed between the $\alpha 4$ subunit and the $\alpha 3$ subunit. Using site directed mutagenesis, these $\alpha 4$ residues were replaced with the respective $\alpha 3$ residues: T147S, R185I, E188N, and A191E. To confirm that the mutations do not markedly alter the functional properties of the receptors, wt and mutant $\alpha 4$ subunits were coexpressed with the $\beta 2$ subunits in *Xenopus laevis* oocytes and dose response curves for ACh were recorded using the robotic automated two-electrode voltage clamp system (Fig. 2). This automated screen revealed that all single point mutants were functionally expressed and their EC_{50} values for ACh were in the same order of magnitude as that of the wt receptor (Table 1).

The $\alpha 4R185I$ mutation enables efficient binding of α -conotoxins MII, TxIA and [A10L]TxIA to the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor – α -Conotoxin MII blocks heterologously expressed $\alpha 3\beta 2$ and $\alpha 6\beta 2^*$ nAChRs with low nanomolar potency (IC_{50} : 0.5-8 nM and 0.4 nM, respectively (Cartier et al., 1996; Dowell et al., 2003; Harvey et al., 1997; Kaiser et al., 1998; McIntosh et al., 2004)). Because it also blocks $\alpha 4\beta 2$ nAChRs at about 100-1000-fold higher concentrations (IC_{50} : 430-550 nM (Cartier et al., 1996)), we initially determined dose-response relationships of α -conotoxin MII on wt and mutant $\alpha 4\beta 2$ nAChRs to test if any of the mutations in the $\alpha 4$ subunit improved its affinity. As shown in Fig. 3A and table 2, the $\alpha 4R185I$ exchange caused a more than 10-fold decrease of the IC_{50} value (193 nM) in comparison to the wt $\alpha 4\beta 2$ nAChR (3293 nM) while all other

MOL#78683

mutations did not significantly alter the potency of MII. To examine whether these findings were specific for α -conotoxin MII we next investigated the dose-response relationships of α -conotoxins TxIA and [A10L]TxIA. As previously determined (Dutertre et al., 2007), TxIA and [A10L]TxIA have similar potency compared to MII on $\alpha 3\beta 2$ nAChRs (IC_{50} : 2 and 3.6 nM, respectively) but in contrast to MII, they also block homomeric $\alpha 7$ nAChR with IC_{50} values of 390 nM and 39 nM, respectively, and show no affinity for the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor at concentrations up to 10 μ M (Dutertre et al., 2007). Both analogues have comparably little sequence identity with MII apart from the residues that are generally conserved in most $4/7\alpha$ -conotoxins such as the four cysteine residues, G1, and P6 (Table 3). As seen with MII, no significant improvement of affinity was caused by the T147S, E188N, and A191E mutations in the $\alpha 4$ subunit while the effect of the R185I mutation was even stronger than for MII with a more than 1000-fold affinity increase, which made TxIA a potent blocker (IC_{50} : 18 nM) at this mutant (Fig. 3B). Likewise, the [A10L]TxIA-analogue was rendered into an efficient antagonist (IC_{50} 123 nM) at the $\alpha 4(R185I)\beta 2$ mutant (Fig. 3D).

The $\alpha 3I186R$ mutation impairs binding of α -conotoxins MII, TxIA, and [A10L]TxIA to the $\alpha 3\beta 2$ receptor – R185 lies in a stretch of 15 amino acids (174-188) in the $\beta 9$ strand preceding the critical cysteine pair that forms a vicinal disulfide bridge at the tip of loop C, which covers the intersubunit binding site (Fig. 1). These residues are highly variable between the $\alpha 3$ and $\alpha 4$ subunits, which might result in different backbone conformations of the loop C and consequently generally different dimensions or accessibility of the conotoxin binding sites. However, our results with MII demonstrate that the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ binding site can principally accommodate α -conotoxins but that R185

MOL#78683

might specifically clash with one or more residues in the α -conotoxins and thus prevent or impair their high affinity binding. To further investigate the specific role of the side chain in this position we replaced the equivalent isoleucine residue in the $\alpha 3\beta 2$ receptor by an arginine residue. This I186R exchange in the $\alpha 3$ subunit caused a more than 10-fold decrease in the affinity of MII (IC_{50} : 58 nM) and a 30-fold decrease in the affinity of TxIA (IC_{50} : 60 nM) and [A10L]TxIA (IC_{50} 77 nM). Thus, TxIA was even slightly more potent at the $\alpha 4(R185I)\beta 2$ receptor than at the $\alpha 3(I186R)\beta 2$ receptor. These results are in agreement with our assumption that R185 specifically interacts with α -conotoxin binding.

α -conotoxin binding to $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptors is prevented by a positively charged residue in position 185 of the $\alpha 4$ subunit – Next we exchanged R185 in the $\alpha 4$ subunit by alanine, lysine, and glutamate to determine if a positive charge is required to prevent α -conotoxin binding or if this is due to a steric effect of the bulky arginine side chain. As shown in Fig. 3D, replacement of arginine by alanine or the negatively charged glutamate caused comparable potency increases of [A10L]TxIA as the substitution by isoleucine with IC_{50} values of 372 nM and 118 nM, respectively. In contrast, [A10L]TxIA was inactive at the $\alpha 4(R185K)\beta 2$ mutant. Together with the fact that the substitution by the negatively charged glutamate resulted in a 3-fold lower IC_{50} value than substitution by the small alanine, this suggests that a positive charge in position 185 of the α subunit prevents α -conotoxin-binding.

An additional $\alpha 4P195Q$ mutation completely transfers low nanomolar potency of [A10L]TxIA to the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor – The α -conotoxin potencies achieved at the $\alpha 4R185I\beta 2$ receptor are still in the medium to high (20 – 200 nM) nanomolar range. In

MOL#78683

contrast, low to subnanomolar potencies are usually achieved at $\alpha 3\beta 2$ and the closely related $\alpha 6\beta 2$ subtype or the homomeric $\alpha 7$ subtype. Based on sequence alignment and homology modeling, we hypothesized that proline 195 could constitute the remaining obstacle (Fig. 1). Although it does not directly face the α -conotoxin binding site, it might disturb the binding by structurally altering the loop C. Indeed, replacement of $\alpha 4P195$ by the homologous glutamine residue found in the $\alpha 3$ subunit rendered [A10L]TxIA active at this receptor (IC_{50} : 707 nM). In combination with the R185I substitution, the P195Q mutation caused an additional 40-fold increase in the potency of [A10L]TxIA and rendered this mutant $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor equally sensitive (IC_{50} : 3.2 nM) to [A10L]TxIA as the $\alpha 3\beta 2$ subtype. Interestingly, the R185I/P195Q double exchange also significantly increased the sensitivity to ACh as determined by both automated and conventional analysis of DRCs (Table 1, Fig. 2).

Probing the binding mode of [A10L]TxIA at the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor – We have previously identified several mutants in the $\beta 2$ subunit that improve the efficiency of conotoxins with a long side chain in position 10 to block the $\alpha 3\beta 2$ receptor (Dutertre et al., 2005). We deduced from these studies that the first loop of α -conotoxins (residues 4-7) faces towards the α -subunit while the second loop (residues 9-15) interacts with the β subunit. This binding mode is in good agreement with co-crystallization studies of the acetylcholine binding protein and was further refined in subsequent functional studies (Celie et al., 2005) (Dutertre et al., 2007). To test if a principally similar binding mode was preserved in the $\alpha 4R185I\beta 2$ mutant, we combined in analogous experiments the $\alpha 4R185I$ subunit with the previously identified $\beta 2V109G$ mutant (Dutertre et al., 2005). Combination of these subunits caused an additional potency increase of [A10L]TxIA that

MOL#78683

was at least 20-fold higher (IC_{50} 6,6 nM) than for each single mutation in combination with the respective wt-subunit (IC_{50} :123 nM and 213 nM, respectively, Fig. 3E, Table 2). Since we have previously found that the β 2V109G mutation causes a potency increase of α -conotoxins with a long side chain in position 10 in combination with both wt- α 3 and wt- α 4 subunits (Dutertre et al., 2005), we suggest that this interaction with the β 2(V109G) subunit is preserved in a similar way if combined with the α 4(R185I) subunit. Consequently, the binding mode should not be different from what we have determined for the α 3 β 2 receptor (Dutertre et al., 2005) and the α 4 subunit likely interacts with the N-terminus of the α -conotoxin.

Computational studies of α -conotoxin binding mode at α 4 β 2 receptors – Next, we placed [A10L]TxIA in the binding pocket of a α 4 β 2 homology model in the same position where it was co-crystallised with AChBP (Dutertre et al., 2007). However, this procedure failed to identify a direct interaction of α 4R185 with any conotoxin residue or with the conotoxin backbone (Fig. 4A). We therefore performed docking studies on a homology model based on the refined structure of the *Torpedo marmorata* nAChR (Unwin, 2005) α 4 subunit (Fig. 4B). Remarkably, these docking simulations revealed an interaction of α 4R185 with the arginine residue in position 5 of the conotoxins (Supplemental Figures 1A and 2). In addition, MD simulations revealed a weaker binding of conotoxin [A10L]TxIA at the wt proteins (Fig.4 C,D,E). In contrast, the same MD simulations run with the R185I mutation allow the conotoxin to bind deeper in its binding pocket (Fig. 4C, E). In addition, the P195Q substitution results in a greater flexibility of loop C, enabling a more peripheral position of the critical R185 residue that likewise allows a closer contact to the conotoxin (Fig. 4D, 5A). In case of the R185I/P195Q

MOL#78683

double mutation, both effects lead to a further improved positioning of the conotoxin (Fig.4E, Supplemental Fig. 1B). However, no significant correlation between distance and conotoxin binding enthalpies is seen (Fig. 5A and B). For example, the conotoxin - β 2 subunit distances remain between 1.5 and 1.6 nm, although the respective energies decrease implying stronger binding. Apparently, the different binding enthalpies are not explained by the distances between [A10L]TxIA and the β 2 subunit. We also investigated the involvement of loop C - conotoxin interaction in the measured overall binding energies. However, the results for the different protein/conotoxin combinations (Supplemental Fig. 3) do not strictly correlate with the calculated binding energies (Fig. 5). Consequently, we cannot ascribe the found conotoxin - protein interactions to the respective conotoxin - loop C residue interactions solely. Similarly, single fluctuations of loop C residues seem to be independent of the actual mutation state (Supplemental Fig 4). Nevertheless, analysis of structural changes (rmsd) during MD to estimate the contribution of loops C to conotoxin binding showed that R185 has the largest influence on loop C conformation (Supplemental Fig. 2).

While no significant binding enthalpy difference is seen for the P195Q mutation, the binding enthalpy is significantly stronger than in the wt for both the R185I mutant and the P/R double mutant (Fig. 5B). Moreover, an overall trend to stronger binding enthalpies of [A10L]TxIA with wt < P195Q < R185I < P195Q/R185I is seen at a significance level of 5×10^{-4} and reflects the results obtained in functional experiments (Fig. 5B).

MOL#78683

Discussion

In this study, we have identified two amino acid residues, R185 and P195, in the $\alpha 4$ nicotinic receptor subunit that, if replaced by the corresponding residues in the $\alpha 3$ subunit, completely transferred the low nanomolar potency of α -conotoxin [A10L]TxIA to the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ subtype which is otherwise insensitive to this toxin. Replacement of R185 by isoleucine resulted in a 10-fold (MII) up to at least 1000-fold (TxIA and [A10L]TxIA) enhanced potency of different 4/7 α -conotoxins at the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor subtype. Replacement of the corresponding I186 residue in the $\alpha 3$ subunit by an arginine residue reduced the potency of these conotoxins at the $\alpha 3\beta 2$ receptor more than 10-fold. These findings are in good agreement with previous studies which demonstrated the importance of these two residues (Harvey et al., 1997) for MII and PnIA binding to the $\alpha 3\beta 2$ receptor by replacing them with the homologous residues (K and P, respectively) from the conotoxin-insensitive $\alpha 2$ subunit (Everhart et al., 2003). Here, we further demonstrate that replacement of $\alpha 4$ R185 by the smaller alanine or a negatively charged glutamate but not by a positively charged lysine enhanced affinity for of the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor for [A10L]TxIA. We conclude from these data, that a positive charge in this position specifically prevents high affinity binding of most conotoxins to the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ nicotinic receptor and thus represents a major determinant for subtype selectivity. Since arginine and lysine are both very bulky residues, a steric interaction rather than a charge effect of $\alpha 4$ R185 cannot be excluded and could explain the lack of activity of 4/7 α -conotoxins that carry a non-charged leucine residue in position 5 (such as PnIA and PnIB). In support of a charge effect, however, the identified α -conotoxins that show low activity at

MOL#78683

the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor (MIL, GID, GIC, and AnIB), have a neutral asparagine residue or an only partially protonated (at pH 7.4) histidine residue in this position.

The strong effect of the $\alpha 4(R185I/P195Q)$ double mutation on the EC_{50} value for ACh might indicate that the combination of these mutations also produces an improved binding and/or gating efficiency of ACh. Alternatively, this mutation could disturb the expression of correctly folded $\alpha 4$ subunits and result in a reduced $\alpha 4:\beta 2$ subunit ratio which has been demonstrated to produce $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor stoichiometries with high affinity for ACh (Zwart and Vijverberg, 1998). The latter idea is supported by the fact that a decrease in the ratio of injected $\alpha 4(P195Q):\beta$ RNA resulted in a reduced expression of functional receptors that showed a decreased EC_{50} value for ACh (results not shown).

Homology models as prediction tools – Initial visualisation of the complex receptor-conotoxin using a homology model based on the homomeric AChBP (Dutertre et al, 2007), failed to reveal a direct interaction that would prevent α -conotoxin binding (Fig. 4A and Supplemental Fig. 2). However, molecular dynamics and docking studies with [A10L]TxIA on a refined $\alpha 4\beta 2$ homology model based on the *Torpedo marmorata* nAChR demonstrated that the $\alpha 4R185$ /conotoxin R5 interaction weakens the conotoxin binding suggesting that this vertebrate receptor, despite the lower resolution of its structure (4Å compared to 2.7Å for the AChBP structure), represents a more suitable template to generate rat $\alpha 4\beta 2$ homology models. Nonetheless, a recent crystallization study on a soluble $\alpha 7$ /AChBP chimera (Li et al.) that contains the loop C of the human $\alpha 7$ receptor with a similar loop C architecture and side chain positioning as our AChBP model supports the usefulness of this widely used model. Interestingly, loop C of the $\alpha 7$

MOL#78683

receptor also contains R and P residues in homologous positions to the $\alpha 4$ subunit. Yet the α -conotoxins tested in our study were previously shown to efficiently block the $\alpha 7$ receptor with IC_{50} values of 39 nM ([A10L]TxIA), 100 nM (MII), and 392 nM (TxIA) (Cartier et al., 1996; Dutertre et al., 2007) and several α -conotoxins with even higher potencies at this receptor have been identified. This is in contrast to the strong effect of these residues in our functional studies and the poor affinity of all identified α -conotoxins at the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor. A possible explanation for this discrepancy could lie in the heteromeric nature of the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ and $\alpha 3\beta 2$ ligand binding sites which might have a different architecture and for which the heteromeric torpedo nAChR might provide a better template than the homomeric $\alpha 7$ and AChBP binding sites. In support of this, our MD simulations on a *Torpedo* nAChR-based model reproduced the rank order of potency of the conotoxin [A10L]TxIA on the different $\alpha 4\beta 2$ mutants. A very recent study demonstrated that the homologous positions in the $\alpha 6$ subunit (I188 and T198) confer selectivity of α -conotoxin BuIA for this subunit (Kim and McIntosh, 2012). A direct interaction between BuIA and I188 could not be identified in their model of the complex and it was suggested that alterations in the loop C structure account for the potency differences of the conotoxin, a conclusion also supported by our MD simulation results.

Design of optimized α -conotoxins – α -conotoxins are important pharmacological tools that cannot only discriminate between distinct nicotinic receptor subtypes but are also able to differentiate between non-equivalent binding sites within the same heteromeric receptor (for a recent review see (Tsetlin et al., 2009)). Radioactively labelled or fluorescent α -conotoxins can help receptor localization (Hone et al.; Whiteaker et al., 2008) and α -conotoxins have the potential to be developed into novel

MOL#78683

drugs (Olivera et al., 2008). So far, natural α -conotoxins with selectivity for the following neuronal nicotinic receptor subtypes have been identified: $\alpha 3\beta 2$ and $\alpha 6$ -containing nAChRs (MII), $\alpha 9\alpha 10$ nAChRs (RgIA), and $\alpha 7$ and $\alpha 3\beta 2$ nAChRs (ImI) (Ellison et al., 2008; Ellison et al., 2004; McIntosh et al., 2004). The subtype selectivity of several α -conotoxins could be further optimized yielding analogues that are able to differentiate even between closely related nicotinic receptor subtypes. These include α -conotoxins with selectivity for $\alpha 6$ -containing nAChRs (MII[S4A;E11A;L15A]), $\alpha 6\beta 4^*$ nAChRs (BuIA[T5A;P6O]), and $\alpha 7$ nAChRs (ArIB[V11L;V16D]) (Azam et al., 2010; Azam et al., 2008; Whiteaker et al., 2007). Apparently, conotoxins selective for mammalian $\alpha 4\beta 2$ interfaces have not evolved in cone snails or up to now escaped discovery. $\alpha 4\beta 2$ -selective α -conotoxins would have the potential to differentiate not only between $\alpha 4\beta 2$ and other nicotinic receptor subtypes but could potentially help to identify multiple $\alpha 4\beta 2^*$ receptor assemblies which represents an important task in view of their variety in the CNS. In further studies, it is crucial to determine if α -conotoxins can be designed that are able to bind with high affinity to the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ binding site or if this requires peptides with different backbone folds.

In conclusion, our study identified an important determinant of subtype selectivity between $\alpha 3\beta 2$ and $\alpha 4\beta 2$ nAChRs and indicates that α -conotoxins have substantially different binding modes at homomeric $\alpha 7$ and heteromeric $\alpha 4\beta 2$ and $\alpha 3\beta 2$ receptors. This information provides an essential basis and important caveat for further modelling and mutagenesis studies.

MOL#78683

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Authorship Contributions

Participated in research design: Nicke, Dutertre

Conducted experiments: Beissner, Danker, Sporning, Nicke, Dutertre, Schemm

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Wrote or contributed to the writing of the manuscript: Nicke, Dutertre, Schemm, Grubmüller

MOL#78683

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MOL#78683

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MOL#78683

Footnotes

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MOL#78683

Figure Legends

FIGURE 1. Sequence alignment. Rat $\alpha 4$ and $\alpha 3$ nAChR subunits have 61.84 % sequence identity in their ligand binding domain. Asterisks indicate the position of residues mutated in this study.

FIGURE 2. Agonist dose response curves for ACh. The indicated wt and mutant $\alpha 3$ and $\alpha 4$ subunits were coexpressed with $\beta 2$ subunits in *Xenopus laevis* oocytes. Responses to ACh were measured at -60 mV with the Roboocyte™ system or at -70 mV with a conventional TEVC setup (red lines and symbols, control experiments for the most critical mutants in this study). Dose response curves for (A) wt and mutant $\alpha 3\beta 2$ and $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptors and (B) different $\alpha 4\beta 2$ mutants.

FIGURE 3. Concentration-response analysis of α -conotoxins MI, TxIA, and [A10L]TxIA on wild type and mutant nAChRs. The indicated subunit combinations were expressed in *Xenopus* oocytes and analyzed by 2-electrode voltage clamp. Responses to 2-s pulses of $100 \mu\text{M}$ ACh were recorded after a 3-min preincubation with the indicated toxin. IC_{50} values and Hill slopes are given in Table 2. Each point represents the average of at least 4 measurements. Error bars represent S.E. The dotted line in (E) shows the same data as in (D).

FIGURE 4. Molecular simulations of conotoxin binding in wt and mutant $\alpha 4\beta 2$ homology models. (A) Position of TxIA in the binding site of $\alpha 4\beta 2$ based on the co-crystal structure with AChBP, showing the absence of a steric clash between the conotoxin and receptor residues. The model of the $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptor was generated using the AChBP bound to TxIA crystal structure as a template, as previously described (Dutertre et al., EMBO J, 2007) (B) Loops C of wt $\alpha 4$ subunit

MOL#78683

models based on AChBP (orange) and *T. torpedo* nAChR (yellow) with the respective TxIA (starting structures). (C, D, E) Loops C of wt (yellow), $\alpha 4$ (R185I) $\beta 2$ (green), $\alpha 4$ (P195Q) $\beta 2$ (cyan), and $\alpha 4$ (R185I, P195Q) $\beta 2$ (magenta) receptor models based on the *Torpedo* nAChR with the [A10L]TxIA conotoxin in minimized average structures.

FIGURE 5. Calculated average [A10L]TxIA α -conotoxin distances and binding enthalpies. (A) α -Conotoxin distances to loop C (R(I)185-Y194) of $\alpha 4$ (orange) and to $\beta 2$ subunit (center of mass of backbone) (green). (B) Binding enthalpies (sum of short-range Coulomb+Lennard-Jones energies) for α -conotoxin [A10L]TxIA with wt, P195Q, R185I, and P195Q/R185I $\alpha 4$ subunits (red) and with $\beta 2$ subunits (green). Overall binding energies are shown in blue. Energies and distances were calculated from 10 to 50 ns.

MOL#78683

Tables

TABLE 1. EC₅₀ values for acetylcholine at wt and mutant $\alpha 3\beta 2$ and $\alpha 4\beta 2$ receptors obtained with the robocyte system. Hill coefficients were constrained between 0 and 2 in cases where the originally obtained coefficients were unreliable (CI > 4). For comparison, asterisks represent values obtained in a conventional TEVC set up.

	EC ₅₀ [μ M]	95% CI	Hill Slope
$\alpha 3\beta 2$	369.6	302-453	0.9
$\alpha 3(I186R)\beta 2$	376.7	313-454	1.0
$\alpha 4\beta 2$	91.9/93.9*	76-111/76-117*	2.0/1.9*
$\alpha 4(T147S)\beta 2$	75.2	44-128	2.0
$\alpha 4(A191E)\beta 2$	87.3	67-113	2
$\alpha 4(E188N)\beta 2$	56.7	46-71	1.0
$\alpha 4(R185I)\beta 2$	108.9/138.0*	88-135/115-166*	2.0/1.8*
$\alpha 4(R185A)\beta 2$	61.4	45-84	1.3
$\alpha 4(R185K)\beta 2$	139.8	91-214	2.0
$\alpha 4(R185E)\beta 2$	80.3	52-125	2.0
$\alpha 4(P195Q)\beta 2$	66.5/110.5*	37-120/43-282*	1.2/0.7*
$\alpha 4(P195Q/R185I)\beta 2$	7.3/5.6*	3.2-16.4/3.6-8.7*	1.1/0.8*

MOL#78683

TABLE 2. IC₅₀ values and Hill coefficients (n_H) for the α-conotoxins MII, TxIA, and [A10L]TxIA at wt and mutant α3β2 and α4β2 receptors. Numbers in brackets represent 95% confidence intervals.

	MII		TxIA		[A10L]TxIA	
	IC ₅₀ [nM]	n _H	IC ₅₀ [nM]	n _H	IC ₅₀ [nM]	n _H
α4β2	3293 (2855- 3798)	-0.852	–	–	–	–
α4(T147S)β2	3206 (2538- 4050)	-0.903	–	–	n.d.	–
α4(E188N)β2	3766 (3253- 4361)	-1.03	–	–	n.d.	–
α4(A191E)β2	1938 (1683- 2233)	-0.996	–	–	n.d.	–
α4(R185I)β2	192.8 (158-236)	-1.058	18.1 (15.2- 21.6)	-0.813	123 (102-113)	-0.835
α4(R185A)β2	n.d.	–	n.d.	–	415	-0.980

MOL#78683

					(333-515)	
$\alpha 4$ (R185K) $\beta 2$	n.d.	–	n.d.	–	–	–
$\alpha 4$ (R185E) $\beta 2$	n.d.	–	n.d.	–	91.8 (74.8-113)	-1.079
$\alpha 4\beta 2$ (V109G)	n.d.	–	n.d.	–	213 (167-271)	-1.031
$\alpha 4$ (R185I) $\beta 2$ (V109G)	n.d.	–	n.d.	–	6.6 (4.8-9.1)	-0.755
$\alpha 4$ (P195Q) $\beta 2$	n.d.	–	n.d.	–	707 (533-939)	-0.88
$\alpha 4$ (R185I,P195) $\beta 2$	n.d.	–	n.d.	–	3.2 (2.6-3.8)	-1.11
$\alpha 3\beta 2$	4.2	-0.887	2 (1.68- 2.43)	-1.062	2.0 (Dutertre et al., 2007) (1.8–2.4)	-
$\alpha 3$ (I186R) $\beta 2$	58.3 (45.1- 75.5)	-1.327	60.4 (50.9- 71.6)	-1.033	76.5 (58.9- 99.3)	-1.261

MOL#78683

TABLE 3. Sequence comparison of the 4/7 α -conotoxins. Grey shading indicates residues that are generally conserved. 2/8 and 3/16 cysteine pairs form disulfide bridges.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16			
MII	G	C	C	S	N	P	V	C	H	L	E	H	S	N	L	C			
TxIA	G	C	C	S	R	P	P	C	I	A	N	N	P	D	L	C			
[A10L] TxIA	G	C	C	S	R	P	P	C	I	L	N	N	P	D	L	C			
PnIA	G	C	C	S	L	P	P	C	A	A	N	N	P	D	Y	C			
EpI	G	C	C	S	D	P	R	C	N	M	N	N	P	C	Y	C			
GID	I	R	D	γ	C	C	S	N	P	A	C	R	V	N	N	O	H	V	C

Figure 1

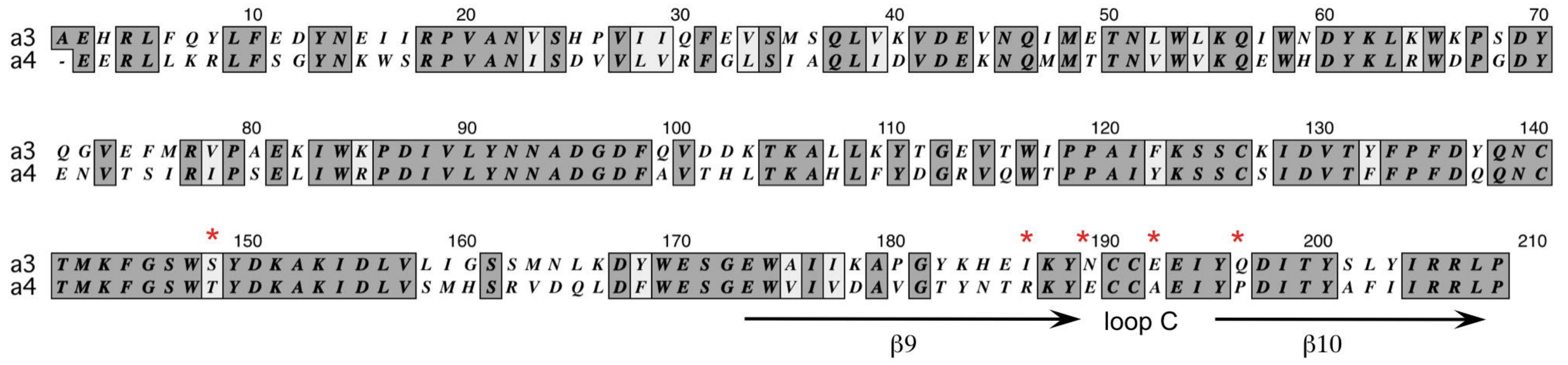


Figure 2

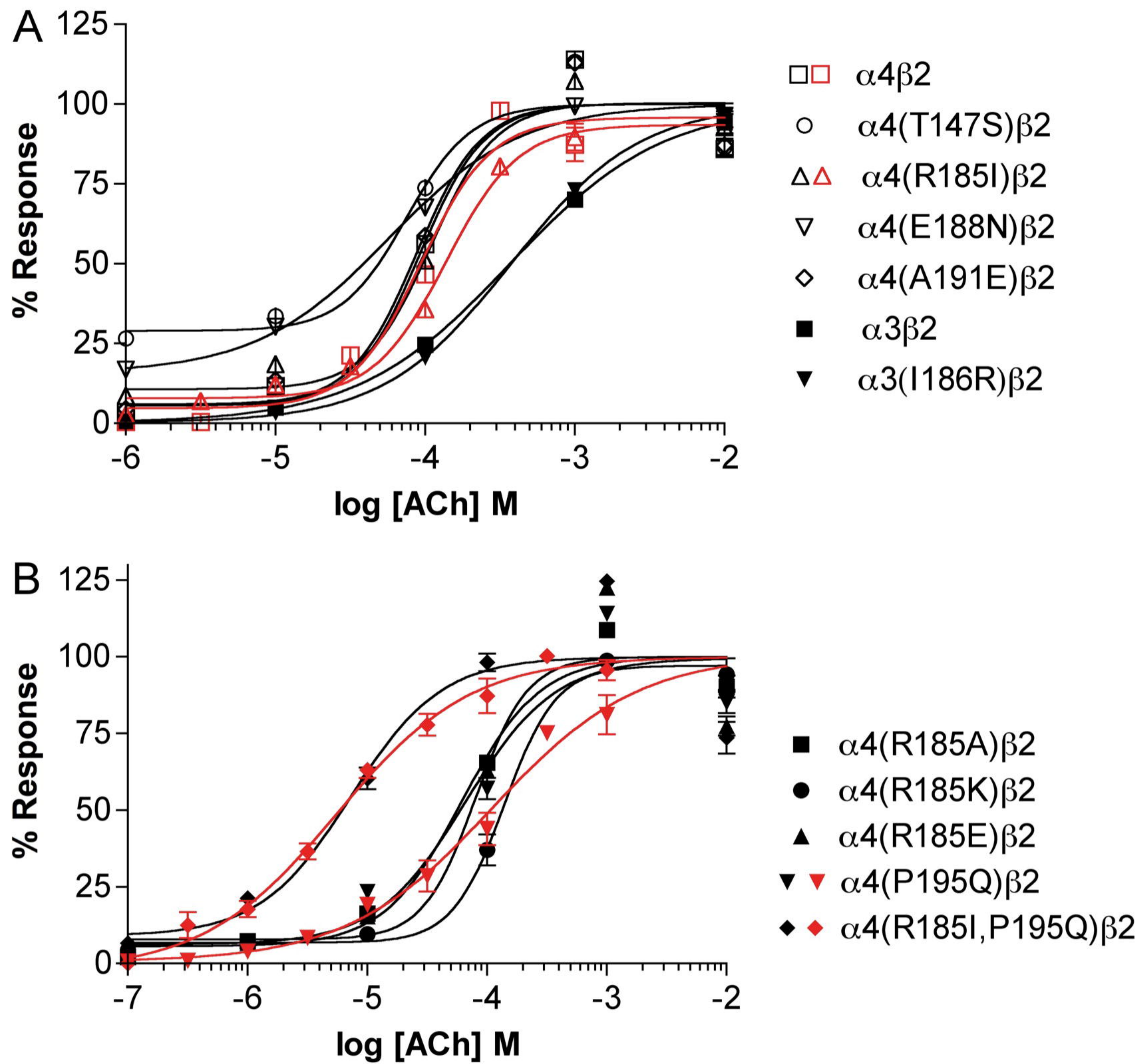


Figure 3

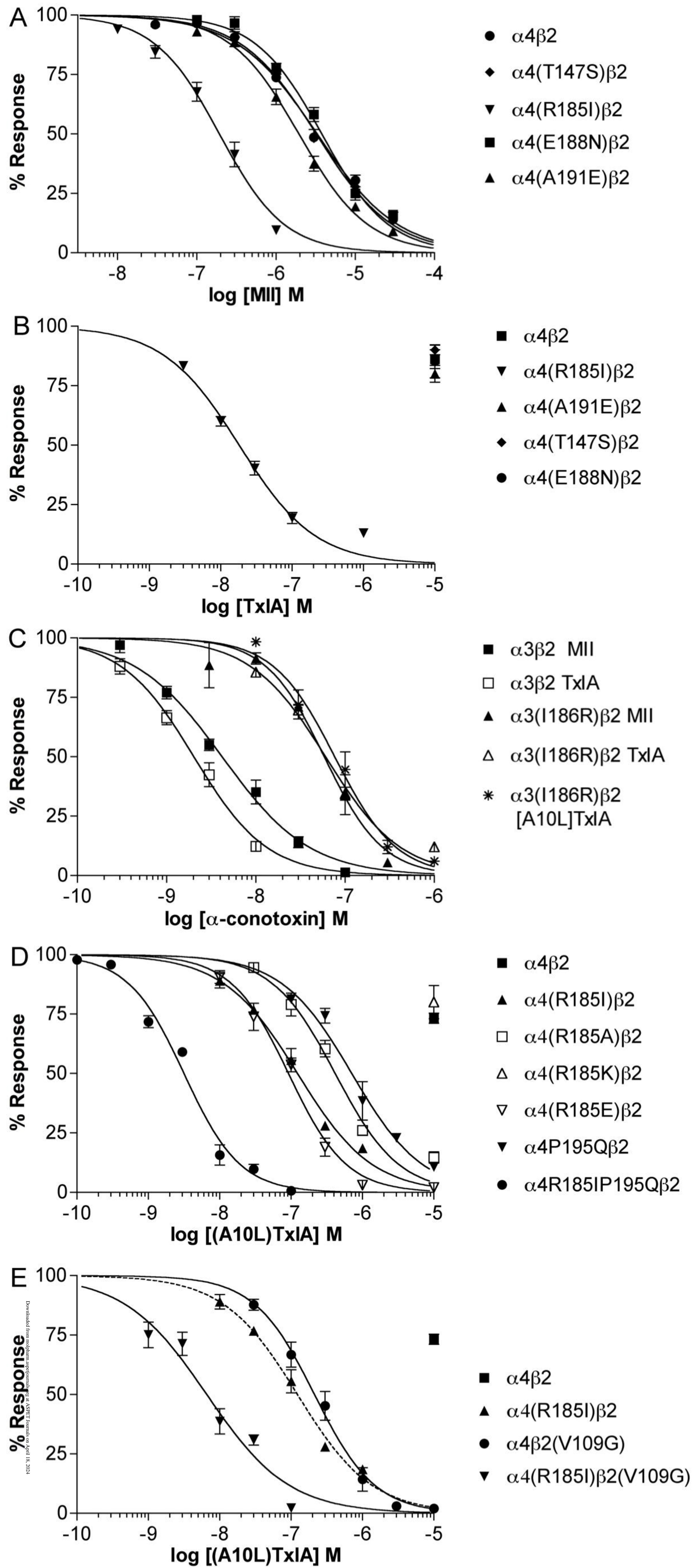


Figure 4

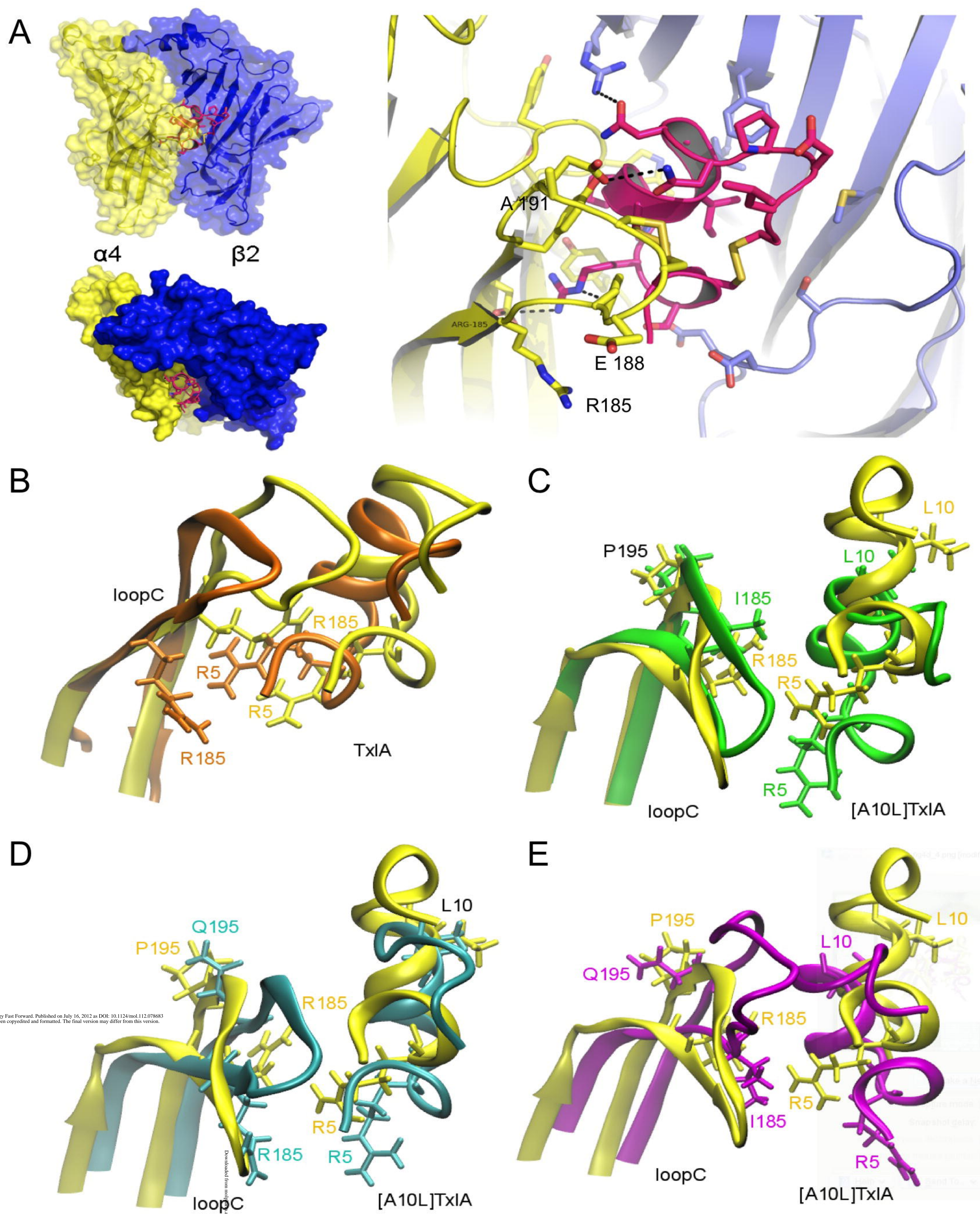


Figure 5

