

A NOVEL MISSENSE MUTATION IN THE *HSD3B2* GENE, UNDERLYING NONSALT-WASTING CONGENITAL ADRENAL HYPERPLASIA. NEW INSIGHT INTO THE STRUCTURE-FUNCTION RELATIONSHIPS OF 3 β -HYDROXYSTEROID DEHYDROGENASE TYPE II.

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Context: 3 β HSD2 is a bifunctional microsomal NAD⁺-dependent enzyme crucial for adrenal and gonad steroid biosynthesis, converting Δ^5 -steroids to Δ^4 -steroids. 3 β HSD2 deficiency is a rare cause of congenital adrenal hyperplasia caused by recessive loss-of-function HSD3B2 mutations.

Objective: The aim was to define the pathogenic consequences of a novel missense mutation in HSD3B2 gene.

Patient: We report a 7-month-old 46,XX girl referred because of precocious pubarche and postnatal clitoromegaly. Hormonal profile showed inadequate glucocorticoid levels, increased 17OHP and renin levels and very high DHEAS levels, suggestive of compensated nonsalt-losing 3 β HSD2 deficiency.

Design and results: Direct sequencing revealed a novel, homozygous, pG250V HSD3B2 mutation. In vitro analysis in intact COS-7 cells, showed impaired enzymatic activity for the conversion of pregnenolone to progesterone and dehydroepiandrosterone to androstenedione (20% and 27% of WT at 6h, respectively). G250V-3 β HSD2 decreased the Vmax for progesterone synthesis without affecting the Km for pregnenolone. Western blot and immunofluorescence suggested that p.G250V mutation has no effect on the expression and intracellular localization of the mutant protein. Molecular homology modeling predicted that mutant V250 affect a L239-Q251 loop next to a β -sheet structure in the NAD⁺-binding domain.

Conclusions: We identified a novel p.G250V mutation of HSD3B2 which causes an incomplete loss of enzymatic activity, explaining the compensated non-salt loss phenotype. In vitro and in silico experiments provided insight into the structure-function relationship of the 3 β HSD2 protein suggesting the importance of L239-Q251 loop for the catalytic activity of otherwise stable 3 β HSD2 enzyme.

Type II 3 β -hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase/ Δ^5 - Δ^4 -isomerase (3 β HSD2) is a bifunctional microsomal nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide (NAD)⁺-dependent

membrane-bound enzyme that catalyzes the conversion of the three principal endogenous Δ^5 -steroid precursors, pregnenolone, 17 α -hydroxypregnenolone (17OHPreg)

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Abbreviations:

and dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) into their respective Δ^4 -ketosteroids, namely progesterone, 17α -hydroxyprogesterone (17OHP) and androstenedione (Δ^4 -A), all with similar efficiency (Apparent K_m and Apparent V_{max}) (1, 2). The first reaction is the oxidation of the 3β -hydroxyl group to the ketone by dehydrogenase activity; during this process, NAD^+ is reduced to NADH. The intermediate Δ^5 , 3-ketosteroid remains tightly bound to the enzyme with nascent NADH, and the presence of NADH in the cofactor-binding site activates the Δ^5 - Δ^4 -isomerase activity, residing on the same enzyme that adapts different conformation (3, 4). Therefore, 3β HSD2 is essential for the biosynthesis of all classes of active steroid hormones including aldosterone, and cortisol in the adrenal cortex and sex steroids in the adrenals and gonads.

Recessive loss-of-function *HSD3B2* mutations cause a rare form of congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH) characterized by varying degrees of salt loss and incomplete masculinization in males and mild virilization or normal external genitalia in females (5). Deficiency of 3β HSD2 activity in the adrenals precludes normal aldosterone and cortisol synthesis, causing a rise in ACTH and the flooding of cortisol precursors along the Δ^5 -pathway and with marked rise in DHEA and DHEAS production. In humans there are two 3β HSD genes and cognate enzymes. Type I gene (*HSD3B1*) is expressed in placenta and peripheral tissues. Type II gene (*HSD3B2*) encodes the adrenal and gonadal 3β HSD2 enzyme (6). The relatively high levels of 17OHP, Δ^4 -A and testosterone are explained by normal activity of the peripheral isoenzyme 3β HSD1, capable of metabolizing elevated levels of Δ^5 -steroids into Δ^4 -steroids (7).

We are reporting the clinical phenotype, hormonal pattern and molecular studies of a novel homozygous missense (p.G250V) mutation in the *HSD3B2* gene, found in 46,XX girl with suspected diagnosis of 3β HSD2 deficiency. Functional studies argued for the pathogenicity of the mutation. Molecular homology modeling of 3β HSD2 predicted, for the first time, that the reported *HSD3B2* mutations, A245P (7), R249X (8), G250V (present study) and Y253N (7) would affect the Leu239 to Gln251 loop of the protein, emphasizing the importance of this loop for the catalytic activity of otherwise stable 3β HSD2 enzyme.

Subjects and Methods

Case Report

The affected 46,XX patient is an adopted child, reportedly the result of a consanguineous relationship. She was referred to our Hospital at 7 months of age because of precocious pubarche and clitoromegaly with apparent normal external genitalia at birth. At clinical examination, she presented pubic hair Tanner stage

II-III, clitoral enlargement (2.8×1 cm, Figure S1 in the Supplemental Data), two orifices and nonpalpable gonads, body length 66.3 cm (-0.31 SDS), weight 7800g (0.53 SDS) and advanced bone age (18 months). Ultrasonography revealed enlarged adrenal glands and presence of uterus and ovaries. Laboratory tests revealed normal serum electrolytes, low serum cortisol levels and high serum ACTH, dehydroepiandrosterone sulfate (DHEAS), 17OHP, and plasma renin levels (TABLE S1 in the Supplemental Data). Dexamethasone suppression test showed good suppression of adrenal androgens and eliminated suspicion of adrenal tumor (Supplemental TABLE S1). The patient was started on hydrocortisone (11 mg/body surface area (BSA)/d) and fludrocortisone (0.1 mg/d) therapy. During follow up adequate growth velocity and skeletal bone maturation was observed (Figure S2 in the Supplemental Data).

The study was approved by the Ethical Review Board of the Garrahan Pediatric Hospital. Written informed consent was obtained from the adoptive parents.

METHODS are described in the Supplementary appendix

Genetic analysis

The entire coding region and splice junctions of *HSD3B2* were amplified and sequenced (for details, see the Supplementary appendix)

In vitro and in silico studies of mutant 3β HSD2

We characterized the functional and structural consequences of the *HSD3B2* mutation (for detail, see the Supplementary appendix)

Results

Genetic analysis

DNA sequencing of the patient's *HSD3B2* gene revealed a novel homozygous c.749G>T mutation in exon 4, predicting a p.G250V amino acid change (Figure S3 in the Supplemental Data). This sequence variation has not been detected in 120 independent *HSD3B2* alleles. Unfortunately, parent's DNAs were unavailable for genetic studies.

In vitro functional analysis of mutant G250V- 3β HSD2

To assess the effect of the mutation on 3β HSD2 expression and / or activity, COS-7 cells were transfected with either wild-type (WT) or mutant G250V- 3β HSD2 generated by site directed mutagenesis. Western blot analysis confirmed similar levels of expression of both the mutant G250V and the WT 3β HSD2 protein (Figure 1A), suggesting that the mutation does not interfere with protein translation and that the enzyme stability is unaffected. No endogenous immunoreactive 3β HSD protein was detected in mock-transfected COS-7 cells with the empty pcDNA3 vector (Figure 1A). Both WT- 3β HSD2 and mu-

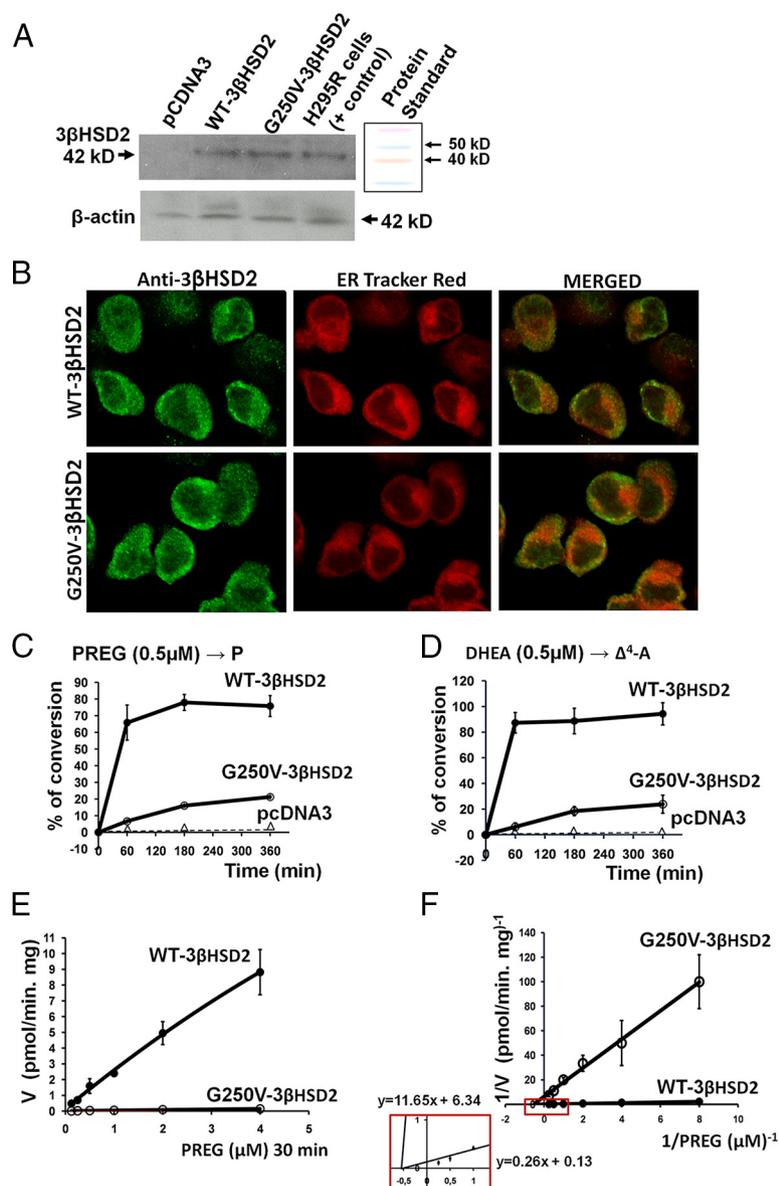


Figure 1. *In vitro* studies of mutant 3β HSD2. COS-7 cells were transiently transfected with empty pcDNA3 vector and pcDNA3 vectors carrying WT 3β HSD2 cDNA and mutant G250V- 3β HSD2 cDNA, generated by site-directed mutagenesis. **A) Western blot analysis.** A 42-KDa 3β HSD2 specific-band was detectable in the homogenates from transfected COS-7 cells expressing the WT- 3β HSD2 and mutant G250V- 3β HSD2 proteins. The mock pcDNA3 vector alone showed no 3β HSD2 specific-band. H295R cell lysate was used as 3β HSD2 positive control. An anti β -actin antibody was used to assure equivalent protein load. **B) Laser scanning confocal microscopy of transfected COS-7 cells.** Cells were grown and incubated with ER Tracker Red (red, middle column) and antihuman 3β HSD2 polyclonal antiserum as primary antibody and the antirabbit Alexa Fluor 488 antibody as secondary antibody (green, left column). Image overlay (right column) shows intracellular colocalization of the endoplasmic reticulum and 3β HSD2 in COS-7 cells expressing WT- 3β HSD2 and mutant G250V- 3β HSD2. Scale bar = 20.0 μ m. **C and D) Comparison between mutant G250V- 3β HSD2 and WT- 3β HSD2 enzyme activities in intact transfected COS-7 cells, based on the time course of enzymatic conversion of unsaturated concentrations of pregnenolone (0.5 μ M) into progesterone (C) and DHEA (0.5 μ M) into Δ^4 -A (D) in the culture medium.** The control vector carrying no 3β HSD2 cDNA exhibited no enzyme activity. **E and F) Kinetic properties of the expressed mutant G250V- 3β HSD2 and WT- 3β HSD2 proteins in intact transfected COS-7 cells.** 48 hours after transfection, COS-7 cells were incubated with 125 nM up to 4 μ M pregnenolone for 30 minutes. Under these conditions, first-order kinetics was always maintained. Data are displayed as Km plot of V (pmol/min.mg total protein in each well) against pregnenolone (E) and Lineweaver-Burk plot (F), used to obtain kinetic constants. The lines intersect the abscissa at approximately the same point (insert), yielding apparent Km values of 1.96 (WT- 3β HSD2) and 1.84 μ M (G250V- 3β HSD2) for pregnenolone. Results are given as mean \pm SD for three independent experiments, each performed in triplicate. PREG, pregnenolone.

tant G250V- 3β HSD2 protein colocalized with ER Tracker Red, a marker of endoplasmic reticulum (Figure 1B). This indicates that the p.G250V mutation has no effect on the intracellular localization of the mutant protein. 3β HSD2 activity was measured as Progesterone or Δ^4 -A production. The time course and amount of formation of Progesterone from Pregnenolone and of Δ^4 -A from DHEA in intact COS-7 cells are depicted in Figure 1C and D. G250V- 3β HSD2 activity using Pregnenolone as substrate for 60, 180 and 360 minutes was 8.7% (\pm 2.4%), 20.5% (\pm 2.7%) and 32% (\pm 0.3%) of WT- 3β HSD2, respectively. Similarly, compared to the WT- 3β HSD2, the G250V- 3β HSD2 mutant produced 7%–27% Δ^4 -A from DHEA over the observation period of 60–360 minutes. The G250V- 3β HSD2 mutant had an affinity for Pregnenolone comparable to that of WT- 3β HSD2 enzyme, with apparent Michaelis constant (K_m) values of $1.84 \pm 0.7 \mu$ M and $1.96 \pm 0.5 \mu$ M, respectively. However, the G250V mutation showed a remarkably decreases V_{max} for the synthesis of Progesterone (0.16 ± 0.05 pmol/min.mg total proteins for WT- 3β HSD2), which results in a catalytic efficiency (V_{max}/K_m) of about 2.3% WT (Figure 1E and F).

In silico structural analysis of the novel p.G250V mutation in 3β HSD2

To obtain a better understanding of the structure–function relationship of p.G250V mutation in 3β HSD2 we performed *in silico* protein modeling studies. The three-dimensional (3D) structure of 3β HSD2 protein were modeled using the crystal structure of galactose mutarotase/UDP-galactose 4-epimerase from *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*

(PDB ID 1Z45) as a template on the basis that it had the highest identity to 3 β HSD (22%) and has NAD⁺ bound in the structure (Figure S4 in the Supplemental Data). Glycine at position 250 is located in a flexible region next to a beta sheet structure in the region of the NAD⁺ binding domain forming a L239 to Q251 loop (Figure 2A). An exchange of Glycine with Valine would result in a rearrangement of the loop to accommodate the more voluminous side chain group, but otherwise no major structural changes were apparent (Figure 2B, a and b).

Discussion

The present data describe the characterization of the novel missense p.G250V mutation found in the *HSD3B2* gene of a female patient with compensated nonsalt-losing 3 β HSD2 deficiency referred because of precocious pubarche and postnatal clitoromegaly at 7 months of age. Deficiency of 3 β HSD2 activity in the gonads precludes normal testosterone synthesis in male fetuses, explaining undervirilization of males (9). The reason for no or lesser virilization of females compared to girls with 21-hydroxylase deficiency (21-OHD) is less clear. Recently, postnatal activity of the backdoor pathway to DHT in patients with 21-OHD was demonstrated and it has been suggested that the backdoor pathway is the major source of virilizing androgens in 21-OHD (10). In this line, this alternate pathway could not be activated in pre- and postnatal 3 β HSD2 deficiency due to very low intraadrenal 17OHP substrate level explaining almost normal sexual differentiation at birth in our patient, as it has been previously suggested (11).

Biochemical data for the patient suggested a subclinical salt loss probably compensated by a limited capacity of aldosterone biosynthesis at the expense of high rennin synthesis (Supplemental TABLE S1). In 3 β HSD2 deficiency, the severity of salt wasting usually shows good correlation with the in vitro enzymatic activity (6, 12). Accordingly, our in vitro data confirmed the partial 3 β HSD2 inactivation by p.G250V for both the conversion of Pregnenolone and DHEA to Progesterone and Δ^4 -A, respectively. Although protein instability was reported to be one factor that may lead to reduced enzyme activity (12, 13), it seemed apparent by Western blot analysis that p.G250V mutation does not impair protein expression. This finding was substantiated by immunofluorescent analysis in COS-7 cells where colocalization of endoplasmic reticulum and mutant protein was observed, indicating the correct intracellular expression.

Because the crystal structure of 3 β HSD has not been determined, a 3D model structure of the 3 β HSD2 was

generated by the comparative modeling technique to study the potential impact of p.G250V mutation on 3 β HSD2 structure. Like other published molecular models for 3 β HSD2, galactose mutarotase/UDP-galactose 4-epimerase from *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* (PDB ID 1Z45) was used as template (14). Comparative modeling could confirm that 3 β HSD2 contained a protein folding pattern of a Rossmann-fold cofactor-binding domain common to NAD (P)-binding proteins (15). Thus, the overall fold of the model would be correct and the cofactor-binding domain of the model would be reliable. However, a comparison of the substrate binding domain is difficult because the substrate specificity is highly variable among protein family members. The Glycine residue at position 250 of the 3 β HSD2 protein is highly conserved across species (Figure 2C). Our 3D model analysis predicted that G250 forms a flexible loop next to a beta sheet structure in the NAD⁺ binding Rossmann-fold domain and hence, the mutant residue V250 in the 3 β HSD2 protein does not obviously interfere with the ligand binding. According to this, WT and G250V mutant proteins had a similar K_m , indicating similar pregnenolone affinities. However, the V_{max} of the G250V mutant was significantly impaired suggesting a more complex conformational change in the mutant protein which would result in a significantly reduced catalytic efficiency. Nevertheless, determining the actual crystal structure of 3 β HSD2 would greatly help to understand the structural biology of the enzyme, including the ligand binding domain. With the amino acid residue of the present study, four amino acid residues (A245, R249, G250 and Y253) involved in the L239 to Q251 loop in 3 β HSD2 structure have been reported to have mutations that affect the enzymatic activity (7, 8). Although Y253 does not form the loop structure itself, it could lose the interaction when mutated (Figure 2A). A complete loss-of-function missense mutation, p.Y253N, was found in a male neonate with classic salt-losing disorder as a compound heterozygote with the p.T187HfsX202 mutation (7, 16). The missense mutation p.A245P has been identified in a 4-year-old boy with the non salt-losing form of 3 β HSD2 deficiency (7, 17) consistent with partial enzyme activity as demonstrated by in vitro assays (7). Similar to our observation for the p.G250V mutation, Simard et al (7) showed, by immunoblot analysis, that the amount of mutant recombinant 3 β HSD2 p.A245P and p.Y253N proteins was similar to that of the WT-3 β HSD2 after transient expression in COS-1 cells. These findings suggest that this region would have an important role in the enzyme function without impairing protein stability. We hypothesize that the p.G250V mutation might affect the NADH-induced conformational change needed to activate the isomerase activity (3, 4). The nonsense mutation

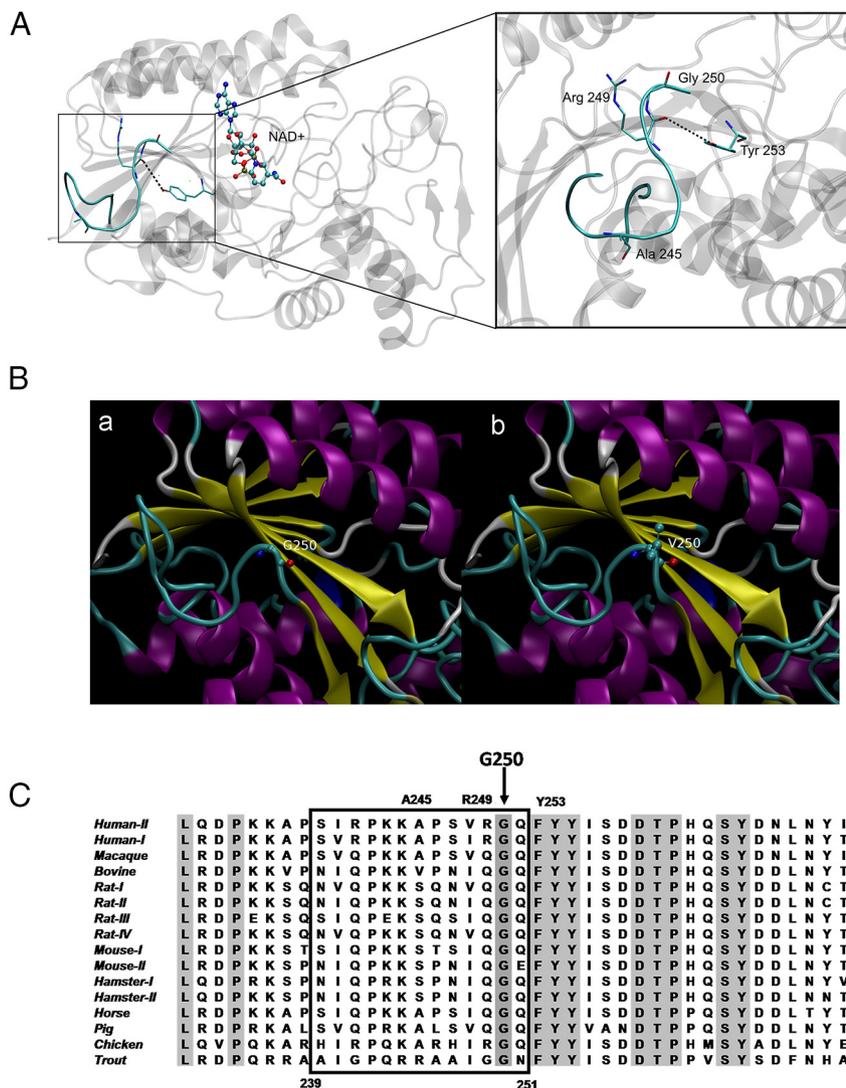


Figure 2. *In silico* structural analysis of the p.G250V mutation in 3β HSD2. **A)** Model of 3β HSD2 protein showing the L239–Q251 loop next to a beta sheet structure in the NAD⁺ binding Rossmann-fold domain. In the closeup view of the site the locations of reported amino acid residues at the L239–Q251 loop whose substitution causes mutations that affect 3β HSD2 enzymatic activity are depicted. A245P, R249X and G250V (present study) form the loop structure and Y253N may lose the interaction when mutated. **B)** A closeup of both **G250 (a)** and mutant **V250 (b)** at the L239–Q251 loop demonstrating the more prominent side-chain group of the mutant valine as compared to the side-chain group Glycine. **C)** A partial sequencing alignment of human 3β HSD2 amino acid sequence with members of the 3β HSD gene family. Different orthologous and paralogous members are specified in the left side of the protein sequences. The numbers indicated refer to the human type II sequence. The amino acid residues forming the L239–Q251 loop are boxed. Conserved residues among 3β HSD gene family proteins are shaded. The amino acid residue G250 is very well conserved across species. The amino acid residues at the L239–Q251 loop whose substitution causes mutations associated with 3β HSD2 deficiency are depicted.

R249X described in a homozygous male patient with the salt-losing form is predicted to result in a complete loss of 3β HSD2 activity due to a premature truncation of the protein (8), but protein stability was not analyzed.

In summary, we report a female patient with compensated nonsalt-losing 3β HSD2 and nearly normal external genitalia associated to a previously undescribed missense p.G250V mutation of the *HSD3B2* gene in the NAD⁺

binding Rossmann-fold domain. *In vitro* and *in silico* experiments argued for its functional impact and also provided insight into the structure-function relationship of the 3β HSD2 protein. Finally, this clinical case represents an experimental model of nature that reinforces the concept of the significance of the intrauterus activation of adrenal back-door pathway for the virilization of the external genitalia in the female fetus.

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