A relationship between hypertension and insulin resistance was first recognized more than 20 years ago, but despite keen interest in the subject, there is no widely accepted mechanism by which these two independent risk factors of cardiovascular disease are linked.

We reported that mice with genetic interruption of normal signaling of the pituitary proopiomelanocortin-derived peptide γ-melanocyte stimulating hormone (γ-MSH), whether from impaired secretion from the pituitary or from absence of its receptor Mc3r, develop marked salt-sensitive hypertension. We asked whether these models of genetic salt-sensitive hypertension due to interruption of normal γ-MSH signaling were accompanied by abnormal glucose metabolism.

METHODS
γ-MSH-deficient Pc2−/− mice, and resistant Mc3r−/− mice were studied acutely for measurement of blood pressure and glucose and insulin concentrations after ≥1 week of a high-sodium diet (HSD; 8% NaCl) compared to a normal-sodium diet (NSD; 0.4% NaCl). Mc3r−/− also underwent glucose tolerance test (GTT) and insulin tolerance test.

RESULTS
Both knockout strains were hypertensive and also exhibited fasting hyperglycemia and hyperinsulinemia on the HSD. Mc3r−/− mice on the HSD had impaired glucose tolerance and insulin-mediated glucose disposal compared to wild-type mice on either the HSD or the NSD, or to Mc3r−/− mice on the NSD.

CONCLUSIONS
These results indicate an interaction of interrupted γ-MSH signaling with the HSD to cause hypertension on the one hand and abnormal glucose metabolism, with the characteristics of insulin resistance, on the other. Further study of the nature of this interaction should provide new insight into the mechanisms by which salt-sensitive hypertension and insulin resistance are linked.

Both Pc2<sup>−/−</sup> and Mc3r<sup>−/−</sup> mice developed hypertension when ingesting the HSD, as we had reported earlier<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1).

They also exhibited fasting hyperglycemia and hyperinsulinemia compared to each wild-type strain on either diet, or to the knockout mice ingesting the NSD. Two-way analysis of variance indicated significant effects of genotype and dietary sodium for both strains for fasting glucose and insulin concentrations and MAP (P < 0.003), as well as a significant genotype × diet interaction (P < 0.05).

We characterized this abnormal glucose metabolism further in Mc3r<sup>−/−</sup> mice ingesting the NSD vs. the HSD (Figure 2). In the GTT, Mc3r<sup>−/−</sup> mice fed the HSD had a significantly greater area under the curve of the blood glucose/time relationship compared to Mc3r<sup>−/−</sup> mice on the NSD or Mc3r<sup>+/+</sup> mice on either diet (Figure 2a); these latter three results did not differ from each other. Plasma insulin concentration exhibited a similar pattern; the control level in Mc3r<sup>−/−</sup> mice fed the HSD was elevated over the other three groups, although this was not significant (P < 0.15) as it had been in the mice shown in Figure 1. However, plasma insulin was significantly elevated in Mc3r<sup>−/−</sup> mice on the HSD throughout the 2-h period of the GTT compared to the other three groups (Figure 2b).

To control more fully for differences in dietary composition, we studied two additional groups of fasted Mc3r<sup>−/−</sup> mice, both of which ate the control, NSD diet throughout but one...
and the area under the curve of these two groups was significantly greater than all the other groups ($P < 0.01$, Figure 2a). The plasma insulin response was also similar in the salt-loaded knockout mice (Figure 2b), although at the 40 min time point the value in the knockout mice fed the HSD was significantly higher than that in the knockouts fed the NSD plus normal saline drinking water ($P < 0.05$). These data indicate that the impaired glucose metabolism induced by the HSD in Mc3r−/− mice can be largely attributed to the high-sodium intake rather than to some other difference between the HSD and the NSD.

Results of the insulin tolerance test showed a pattern consistent with the GTT (Figure 2c): nonfasting Mc3r−/− mice on the HSD had a higher basal blood glucose concentration and, although insulin caused a decrease in glucose in all groups, knockout mice on the HSD maintained a higher level throughout the 150 min study compared to Mc3r−/− mice on the NSD or to wild-type mice on either diet. The impaired glucose tolerance and insulin-mediated glucose disposal of the Mc3r−/− mice fed the HSD are suggestive of insulin resistance.

Body weights in the different groups did not differ markedly. $Pc2^{+/+}$ mice fed the NSD weighted 24.2 ± 0.7 g, $Pc2^{+/+}$ fed the HSD 22.6 ± 0.5 g, $Pc2^{+/−}$ on the NSD 22.4 ± 0.5 g, and $Pc2^{+/−}$ on the HSD 21.0 ± 0.4 g. The last value was significantly less than the weight of $Pc2^{+/+}$ mice on the NSD ($P < 0.01$), but no other differences were detected. The corresponding weights for Mc3r+/+ NSD, Mc3r+/+ HSD, Mc3r−/− NSD, and Mc3r−/− HSD were 23.2 ± 0.8, 23.3 ± 0.6, 23.1 ± 0.5, and 22.9 ± 0.4 g ($P$ not significant).

**DISCUSSION**

These experimental results demonstrate that the elevation in blood pressure in two models of salt-sensitive hypertension resulting from impaired signaling of the POMC-derived peptide γ-MSH is accompanied by abnormal glucose metabolism. Mice with γ-MSH deficiency due to genetic absence of the POMC processing enzyme PC2 ($Pc2^{+/−}$) exhibit fasting hyperglycemia and hyperinsulinemia when ingesting the HSD, as do mice lacking the cellular receptor for γ-MSH (Mc3r−/−) which exhibit the features of hormone resistance. The abnormal glucose metabolism in this latter strain is further characterized by impaired glucose tolerance and blunted insulin-mediated glucose uptake.

The phenotypes of the $Pc2^{+/−}$ and Mc3r−/− mice could have some impact on carbohydrate metabolism. The initial report of the $Pc2^{+/−}$ knockout described a mild impairment in growth and a tendency to fasting hypoglycemia and a flat glucose tolerance curve attributed to reduced circulating glucagons, although abnormalities in insulin processing have also been reported in these mice. The development of fasting hyperglycemia during ingestion of the HSD is therefore all the more noteworthy. Mc3r−/− mice have a phenotype characterized by a decrease in skeletal muscle mass and increase in fat mass with an increase in resting energy expenditure; one study has reported basal hyperinsulinemia in these mice, whereas another has documented the development of hyperglycemia and hyperinsulinemia with ingestion of a high-fat diet. We could not confirm hyperinsulinemia in our mice when ingesting the NSD, but were able to unmask it with ingestion of the

![Figure 2a](https://academic.oup.com/ajh/article-abstract/21/12/1284/166638/1286)

![Figure 2b](https://academic.oup.com/ajh/article-abstract/21/12/1284/166638/1287)

![Figure 2c](https://academic.oup.com/ajh/article-abstract/21/12/1284/166638/1288)
HSD. The elevation in plasma insulin concentration during the GTT (Figure 2b) suggests no major defect in insulin secretory capacity. Our results do not support a role of the HSD itself in contributing to altered glucose metabolism and insulin resistance as has been observed in some rodent studies.\(^2\) in wild-type mice, the HSD resulted in trivial differences in fasting blood glucose and insulin concentrations compared with values after ingesting the NSD (Figure 1).

The mechanism(s) by which a HSD induces both hypertension and impaired glucose tolerance in mice with interrupted \(\gamma\)-MSH signaling is not known. Our earlier study\(^3\) showed that a small dose of the peptide, which had no effect on MAP when given intravenously, rapidly lowered MAP to normal when given into the cerebroventricular system of hypertensive \(\gamma\)-MSH deficient mice fed the HSD. This indicated a central site of action of the administered \(\gamma\)-MSH, and led us to speculate that the peptide acts centrally as a tonic brake on sympathetic nervous outflow.\(^14\) Loss of this brake as in \(\gamma\)-MSH deficient \(\gamma\)-MSH deficient Pce2−/− or resistant Mc3r−/− mice could cause increased sympathetic outflow and hypertension during ingestion of the HSD. Much evidence suggests that activation of the sympathetic nervous system can also lead to insulin resistance,\(^15\) perhaps providing an explanation for the effects of the HSD on both blood pressure and glucose metabolism in rodents with impaired \(\gamma\)-MSH signaling. This will be an important possibility to test in future studies.

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