

Photoperiod modulates the effects of norepinephrine on lymphocyte proliferation in Siberian hamsters

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Submitted 18 April 2003; accepted in final form 15 June 2003

Demas, Gregory E., Timothy J. Bartness, Randy J. Nelson, and Deborah L. Drazen. Photoperiod modulates the effects of norepinephrine on lymphocyte proliferation in Siberian hamsters. *Am J Physiol Regul Integr Comp Physiol* 285: R873–R879, 2003; 10.1152/ajpregu.00209.2003.—Siberian hamsters (*Phodopus sungorus*) rely on photoperiod to coordinate seasonally appropriate changes in physiology, including immune function. Immunity is regulated, in part, by the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), although the precise role of the SNS in regulating photoperiodic changes in immunity remains unspecified. The goal of the present study was to examine the contributions of norepinephrine (NE), the predominant neurotransmitter of the SNS, to photoperiodic changes in lymphocyte proliferation. In *experiment 1*, animals were maintained in long [16:8-h light-dark cycle (16:8 LD)] or short days (8:16 LD) for 10 wk, and splenic NE content was determined. In *experiment 2*, in vitro splenocyte proliferation in response to mitogenic stimulation (concanavalin A) was assessed in spleen cell suspensions taken from long- or short-day hamsters in which varying concentrations of NE were added to the cultures. In *experiment 3*, splenocyte proliferation was examined in the presence of NE and selective α - and β -noradrenergic receptor antagonists (phenoxybenzamine and propranolol, respectively) in vitro. Short-day animals had increased splenic NE content compared with long-day animals. Long-day animals had higher proliferation compared with short-day animals independent of NE. NE (1 μ M) further suppressed splenocyte proliferation in short but not long days. Last, NE-induced suppression of proliferation in short-day hamsters was blocked by propranolol but not phenoxybenzamine. The present results suggest that NE plays a role in photoperiodic changes in lymphocyte proliferation. Additionally, the data suggest that the effects of NE on proliferation are specific to activation of β -adrenergic receptors located on splenic tissue. Collectively, these results provide further support that photoperiodic changes in immunity are influenced by changes in SNS activity.

immune; seasonal; stress; sympathetic nervous system; catecholamines

MANY NONTROPICAL MAMMALIAN species undergo seasonal changes in physiology and behavior (8, 22). In addition

to the traditionally studied seasonal changes in reproduction and energy balance (2, 34), there are pronounced fluctuations in immunity and disease susceptibility (reviewed in Refs. 37, 38). For example, field studies of seasonal changes in immunity typically report reduced immune function and increased disease susceptibility during winter compared with spring and summer (24, 29, 30, 38). In addition, photoperiodic changes in immune function have been documented in several rodent species, including deer mice (*Peromyscus maniculatus*) (10, 15) and prairie voles (*Microtus ochrogaster*) (39), as well as Syrian (*Mesocricetus auratus*) (7) and Siberian (*Phodopus sungorus*) (18, 48) hamsters. In some species (e.g., Siberian hamsters, prairie voles), specific immune responses (e.g., antibody production) are suppressed in short days, in accordance with the majority of field studies. In contrast, individuals of other species (e.g., deer mice, Syrian hamsters) display enhanced immune function in short winterlike day lengths compared with long summerlike days. Although the mechanisms for these differences remain unknown, they likely reflect differences in evolutionary pressures that have shaped physiological responses in these species. It has been suggested that photoperiodic changes in immune function may represent adaptive functional responses to seasonal changes in the energetic budgets of small rodents. In other words, all physiological responses are energetically costly; animals may have evolved to reduce immune function at certain times of the year when energy intake is low and energy expenditure is high (29, 37, 38). The precise physiological mechanisms mediating photoperiodic changes in immune function, however, have not been fully characterized.

It is well established that the sympathoadrenal system (i.e., direct sympathetic innervation of lymphoid tissue, as well as secretion of adrenal catecholamines) can have profound effects on immunity. Because of the rather extensive literature demonstrating suppression of immunity by chronic adrenal glucocorticoids (e.g.,

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corticosterone, cortisol) (reviewed in Refs. 16, 41), sympathoadrenal contributions to immune regulation have been largely overlooked. Recent evidence, however, suggests that a wide range of environmental and intrinsic stressors can activate the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and suppress immune function (reviewed in Refs. 32, 43). Anatomic studies also have established the direct innervation of lymphoid tissue by the SNS in a variety of species (4, 45). Norepinephrine (NE), the primary postganglionic sympathetic neurotransmitter, appears to be the predominant neurotransmitter phenotype of these neurons; NE is released from nerve terminals immediately adjacent to lymphocytes, as well as from more distant sites acting in a paracrine fashion (reviewed in Ref. 32). Moreover, NE released from these nerves can have profound effects on both humoral and cell-mediated immunity (19, 20, 33). The actions of NE on immunity appear to be direct; adrenoreceptors (AR) have been localized on lymphoid tissue (32), and NE can alter immune function *in vitro* (26, 33, 40).

NE exerts its effects on target cells by acting on two principal adrenoreceptor subtypes, α - and β -AR. Nearly all lymphoid cells express β -AR, although evidence suggests that β -AR differ in density depending on the specific type of lymphoid cell (43). Circulating lymphocytes and natural killer (NK) cells also express β -AR, although the number of β -AR varies during the lifespan of the cell. Other immune cells, such as B cells, also possess low-affinity β -AR. The existence of specific subtypes of α -AR on immune cells, however, remains controversial. Some studies suggest that both α_1 - and α_2 -AR are expressed on immune cells (19), and there are reports of α -AR expressed on human lymphocytes. In addition, activated rodent macrophages express α_2 -AR (33); however, α -AR have not been identified in rodent lymphocytes.

The broad goal of the present study was to test the hypothesis that the SNS, via direct innervation of lymphoid tissue and concomitant release of NE, plays a role in photoperiodic changes in immune function in Siberian hamsters. Recently, direct SNS innervation of the spleen has been demonstrated in Siberian hamsters using the retrograde transneuronal tract tracer pseudorabies virus (PRV) (17). Specifically, PRV injected into the spleens of Siberian hamsters revealed infected neurons in areas traditionally implicated in SNS regulation (e.g., A5 and C1 cell groups, locus ceruleus). Labeled neurons were also identified in the paraventricular (PVN) and suprachiasmatic nuclei (SCN) of the hypothalamus (17), brain regions critical for the transduction of the photoperiodic signal (22). More recently, our laboratory has demonstrated that the SNS plays an important functional role in regulating photoperiodic changes in immune function in Siberian hamsters. Specifically, short day-housed hamsters receiving surgical denervation of the spleen displayed reduced humoral immunity compared with sham-operated hamsters; splenic denervation, however, had no effect on immunity of long-day hamsters (13). These results suggest that the SNS is associated with photo-

periodic changes in immune function in Siberian hamsters. The specific aims of the present study were 1) to examine the effects of photoperiod on NE content within the spleen, 2) to test the effects of exogenous NE on lymphocyte proliferation, and 3) to identify the AR subtypes involved in mediating these potential effects.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Animals and housing conditions. Adult (>60 days of age) male Siberian hamsters (*Phodopus sungorus*) were obtained from breeding colonies at Johns Hopkins University (*experiments 1 and 2*) and Indiana University (*experiment 3*). The research with animals conforms to federal National Institutes of Health and United States Department of Agriculture regulations and was conducted with approval of our local Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees. Hamsters were weaned at 21 days of age and housed with same-sex siblings. Two weeks before the initiation of the experiments, animals were housed individually in polypropylene cages (27.8 × 7.5 × 13.0 cm) in colony rooms with a 24-h [16:8-h light-dark (LD 16:8)] cycle (lights on 0300 EST). Temperature was kept constant at 20 ± 2°C, and relative humidity was maintained at 50 ± 5%. Food (Purina Rat Chow) and tap water were available *ad libitum* throughout the experiment.

Experiment 1: effects of photoperiod in splenic NE content. The goal of *experiment 1* was to determine the effects of photoperiod on NE content within the spleens of Siberian hamsters. Hamsters ($n = 40$) were selected randomly and assigned to either long (LD 16:8) ($n = 20$) or short days (LD 8:16) ($n = 20$). Animals were maintained in their respective photoperiods for 10 wk. Animals were then brought one at a time into the surgery room and killed by cervical dislocation; paired testes and spleens were removed, cleaned of connective tissue, and weighed at necropsy. Spleens were then snap-frozen in liquid nitrogen to preserve catecholamine content and immediately stored at -80°C freezer until assayed. All necropsies occurred between 1000 and 1100 EST to control for circadian rhythms in lymphocyte proliferation.

*Experiment 2: effects of *in vitro* NE on splenocyte proliferation.* The goal of *experiment 2* was to test the effects of exogenous NE on lymphocyte proliferation in response to mitogenic stimulation. Hamsters ($n = 25$) were selected randomly and assigned to either long ($n = 11$) or short days ($n = 14$) for 10 wk and were then killed by cervical dislocation between 1000 and 1100 EST. Paired testes were removed, cleaned of connective tissue, and weighed at necropsy to determine photoperiodic responsiveness. Spleens were also removed under aseptic conditions, weighed, and immediately suspended in culture medium (RPMI-1640/HEPES).

*Experiment 3: effect of *in vitro* α - and β -adrenergic antagonists on splenocyte proliferation.* The goal of *experiment 3* was to determine which AR subtypes are involved in NE-induced reductions in lymphocyte proliferation in response to mitogenic stimulation. Hamsters ($n = 26$) were selected randomly and assigned to either long ($n = 10$) or short days ($n = 16$) for 10 wk and were then killed by cervical dislocation between 1000 and 1100 EST. Paired testes were removed, cleaned of connective tissue, and weighed at necropsy. Spleens were also removed under aseptic conditions, weighed, and immediately suspended in culture medium (RPMI-1640/HEPES).

HPLC determination of catecholamine content. Splenic NE content was determined in *experiment 1* by measuring NE content in the spleen by reverse-phase high-pressure liquid chromatography with electrochemical detection (HPLC-EC) according to the method of Ref. 12 after Ref. 35. Briefly,

tissue was thawed, weighed, and carefully minced. A 250-mg sample was added to a microcentrifuge tube containing 790 μ l of 0.2 M perchloric acid. Ten microliters of dihydroxybenzoic acid (DHBA; 2 μ g/ml) was added to each sample and served as an internal standard. Tissue was further minced and then sonicated for 5 min on ice (5 \times for each sample). Catecholamines were extracted from the remaining infranant by adding alumina (200 mg/sample), vortexing for 30 s, followed by 1 ml of 0.5 M Tris (pH = 8.6). Last, 200 μ l of perchloric acid was added to elute the catecholamines. Tris buffer was aspirated using a micropipette, and the extracted samples were assayed using an ESA HPLC system with electrochemical detection (guard cell: +35 mV; cell 1: +10 mV; cell 2: -30 mV; Chelmsford, MA). The mobile phase was Cat-A-Phase II purchased from a commercial supplier (ESA). Standard solutions (50, 33, 16.5 ng/ml) were prepared from commercially supplied standard kit (ESA) and were run at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the sets of unknowns. Assay results were analyzed offline and expressed as nanograms per gram tissue. The sensitivity of this assay was 15 pg.

Lymphocyte proliferation. Lymphocyte proliferation in response to the T-cell mitogen, concanavalin A (Con A), was determined using a colorimetric assay based on the tetrazolium salt 3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-5-(3-carboxymethoxyphenyl)-2-(4-sulfophenyl)-2H-tetrazolium (MTS) (11). Splenocytes were separated from tissue by compressing the whole spleen between sterile frosted glass slides; separated cells were suspended in 4 ml of culture medium [RPMI-1640/HEPES supplemented with 1% penicillin (5,000 U/ml)/streptomycin (5,000 μ g/ml), 1% L-glutamine (2 mM/ml), 0.1% 2-mercaptoethanol (5 \times 10⁻² M/ml), and 10% heat-inactivated fetal bovine serum]. Splenocyte counts and viability were determined with a hemacytometer and trypan blue exclusion. Viable cells (which exceeded 95%) were adjusted to 2 \times 10⁶ cells/ml by dilution with culture medium. In a pilot assay, Con A (Sigma Chemical, St. Louis, MO) was diluted with culture medium to concentrations of 0.6, 1.25, 2.5, 5, 10, 20 and 40 μ g/ml; 50 μ l of each mitogen concentration was added to the wells of the plate containing the spleen cell suspensions to yield a final volume of 150 μ l/well (each in duplicate). These concentrations yielded a typical dose-response curve with proliferation absorbance values of 0.37 \pm 0.02, 0.39 \pm 0.26, 0.46 \pm 0.03, 0.53 \pm 0.07, 0.80 \pm 0.20, 1.10 \pm 0.12, 1.31 \pm 0.17, and 0.53 \pm 0.06, respectively. Based on these values, 20 μ g/ml concentration of Con A was chosen as the "optimal" dose because it resulted in maximal mitogen-induced proliferation (as measured by absorbance); this Con A concentration was used in subsequent proliferation assays in *experiments 2* and *3*.

In *experiment 2*, 50- μ l aliquots of each cell suspension (i.e., 100,000 cells) were added to each of three wells of sterile flat-bottom 96-well culture plates. One well then received 50 μ l of 1.0 μ M NE, another well received 50 μ l of 10.0 nM NE, and the last well received 50 μ l of culture medium. Con A was diluted with culture medium to a concentration of 20 μ g/ml; 50 μ l of each of the diluted mitogens was added to the wells of the plate containing the spleen cell suspensions to yield a final volume of 150 μ l/well (each in duplicate).

In *experiment 3*, 50- μ l aliquots of each cell suspension were added to each of four wells of sterile flat-bottom 96-well culture plates. One well received 50 μ l of NE (1 μ M) dissolved in culture media, another well received NE (1 μ M) + propranolol (5 μ M) in culture media, the third well received NE (1 μ M) + phenoxybenzamine (5 μ M), and the last well received culture media alone (no NE). In a previous pilot experiment, we demonstrated that neither propranolol nor phenoxybenzamine administered alone (i.e., without NE) has

any effect on Con A-induced splenocyte proliferation in long- or short-day hamsters (Demas, unpublished data). As in *experiment 2*, an optimal dose of Con A (20 μ g/ml) was added to all spleen cell suspensions.

The plates from both *experiments 2* and *3* were incubated at 37°C with 5% CO₂ for 48 h before addition of 20 μ l of MTS/phenazine methosulfate (PMS) solution [Promega; 0.92 mg/ml of PMS in sterile Dulbecco's phosphate-buffered saline] per well. Plates were then incubated at 37°C with 5% CO₂ for an additional 4 h. The optical density (OD) of each well was determined with a microplate reader (Bio-Rad: model 3550) equipped with a 490-nm wavelength filter. Mean OD values for each set of duplicates were used in subsequent statistical analyses. In *experiment 2*, dose-response curves were constructed using group means of the mean OD values at each mitogen concentration and unstimulated cultures.

Statistical analyses. Differences in testes masses in all three experiments and between splenic NE content in *experiment 1* were assessed by separate independent Student's *t*-tests. Differences in splenocyte proliferation in *experiments 2* and *3* were assessed via a two-way (photoperiod \times drug) between-groups ANOVA. Post hoc comparisons between pairwise means were conducted using Tukey's honestly significant difference tests when the overall ANOVAs were significant. All statistical tests were conducted using SigmaStat Statistical software (San Rafael, CA). In all cases, differences between group means were considered statistically significant if $P < 0.05$.

RESULTS

Experiment 1. Short day-housed hamsters had significantly smaller paired testes masses compared with long-day animals ($P < 0.05$; Fig. 1A), attesting to their photoresponsiveness. Short day-housed hamsters had significantly higher splenic NE content compared with long-day animals ($P < 0.05$; Fig. 1B).

Experiment 2. As in *experiment 1*, short day-housed hamsters had significantly smaller paired testes masses compared with long-day animals ($P < 0.05$; data not shown). Short day-housed hamsters had significantly reduced splenocyte proliferation in response to Con A compared with long-day hamsters ($P < 0.05$; Fig. 2). In addition, in vitro NE (1 μ M) but not NE (10 nM) significantly reduced splenocyte proliferation in short-day hamsters ($P < 0.05$); neither concentration of NE had an effect on splenocyte proliferation in long-day hamsters ($P > 0.05$; Fig. 2). There were no differences in splenic masses between long- and short-day hamsters ($P > 0.05$).

Experiment 3. As in *experiment 1*, short day-housed hamsters had significantly smaller paired testes masses compared with long-day animals ($P < 0.05$; data not shown). Short day-housed hamsters had significantly reduced splenocyte proliferation in response to Con A compared with long-day hamsters, and in vitro NE significantly reduced splenocyte proliferation in short-day hamsters ($P < 0.05$; Fig. 3). In addition, NE-induced suppression of proliferation in short-day hamsters was blocked by the presence of in vitro propranolol, but not phenoxybenzamine ($P < 0.05$; Fig. 3). There were no differences in splenic mass between long- and short-day hamsters.

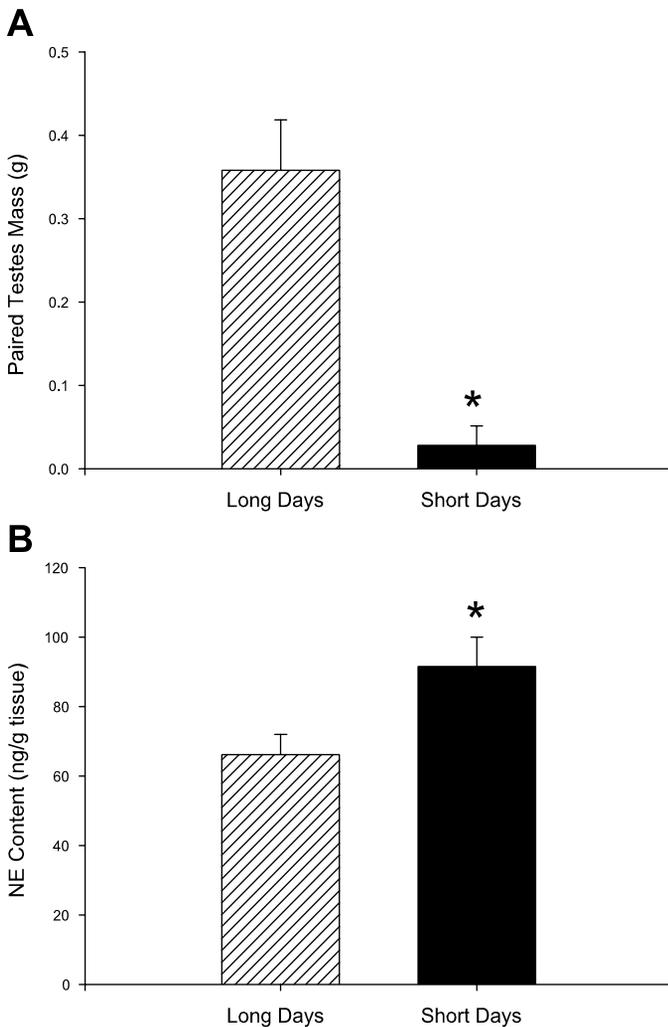


Fig. 1. Mean (\pm SE) paired testes mass (g; A) and splenic norepinephrine (NE) content (B) of animals housed in long [16:8-h light-dark cycle (LD 16:8)] or short (LD 8:16) days. *Significant differences between long- and short-day NE content ($P < 0.05$).

DISCUSSION

The present data demonstrate that short-day hamsters have increased splenic NE content compared with long day-housed animals. In addition, the sympathetic neurotransmitter NE can reduce splenocyte proliferation in vitro in Siberian hamsters, and this effect is photoperiod dependent. Specifically, NE suppressed lymphocyte proliferation to Con A in short but not in long days. Furthermore, the present results support the hypothesis that the effects of NE on proliferation are mediated through β -AR; pharmacological blockade of β -AR, but not α -AR, attenuated NE-induced suppression of splenocyte proliferation. Interestingly, short days also increased splenocyte proliferation in the absence of NE in culture, suggesting that photoperiodic changes in immune cell proliferation are not completely regulated by changes in SNS activity. Collectively, the results of the present study are consistent with the idea that there are photoperiodic changes in immunity and suggest that changes in SNS activity

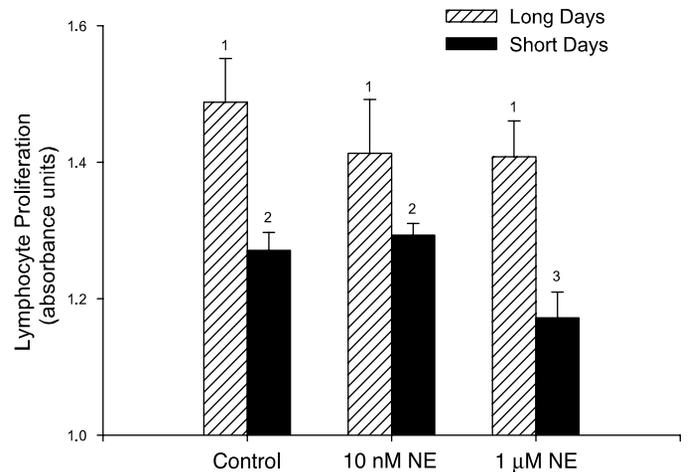


Fig. 2. Mean (\pm SE) splenocyte proliferation of animals housed in long (LD 16:8) or short (LD 8:16) days and with no NE (Control), 10.0 nM NE, or 1 μ M NE added in vitro. Columns sharing the same number are statistically equivalent. Columns with different numbers are statistically different ($P < 0.05$).

(and subsequent NE release) may coordinate, at least in part, photoperiodic changes in lymphocyte proliferation. Furthermore, these effects appear to be mediated directly through interactions with β -AR within lymphoid tissue. These results confirm and extend the results of previous research suggesting an important role for the SNS, and specifically β -AR, in the regulation of cell-mediated immunity (23, 43). The presence of a photoperiodic effect on splenocyte proliferation independent of NE, however, suggests that NE is not absolutely required. Thus, although NE, likely acting through β -AR directly on splenocytes, can modulate photoperiodic changes in lymphocyte proliferation, factors other than the SNS (e.g., melatonin, steroid hormones) may also play an important role in mediating photoperiodic changes in lymphocyte proliferation. On-

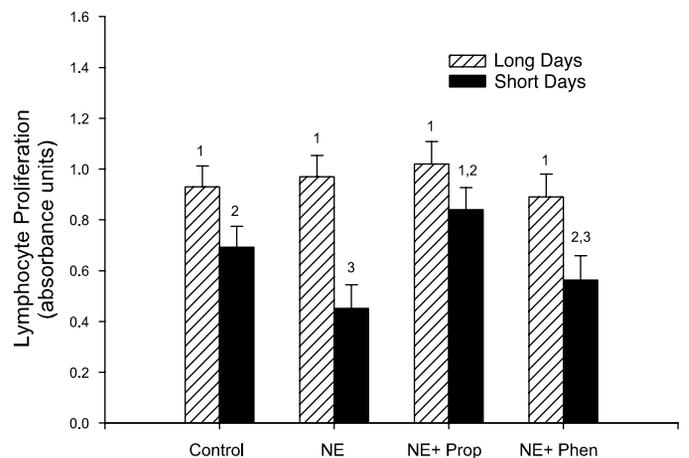


Fig. 3. Mean (\pm SE) splenocyte proliferation in animals housed in long (LD 16:8) or short (LD 8:16) days and with combinations of no NE (Control), 1 μ M NE, or NE + 5 μ M propranolol (NE + Prop) or 5 μ M phenoxybenzamine (NE + Phen) added in vitro. Columns sharing at least one same number are statistically equivalent. Columns with different numbers are statistically different ($P < 0.05$).

going studies are aimed at elucidating these specific factors.

An increasing amount of evidence supports an important role of the SNS in the regulation of immunity (20, 32, 33). For example, an inhibitory role of the SNS in the regulation of immune function has been suggested in several species after denervation of a variety of lymphoid tissue (32). Specifically, global chemical denervation of the peripheral nervous system of adult animals via systemic injections of 6-hydroxydopamine (6-OHDA) enhances antibody responses to T-independent antigens but has no effect on T-independent antibody production (36). In contrast, it has also been reported that 6-OHDA-induced denervation reduces antibody responses to T-dependent antigens in adult rats (21, 28), whereas surgical denervation of the splenic nerve enhances antibody production in neonatal animals (6, 47). More recently, it has been demonstrated that chemical denervation results in a modest increase in anti-KLH antibody production in young rats, but a marked increase in antibodies in older animals (4). These results suggest that the effects of the SNS on immune function depend on several factors, including the age of the animals and the type of denervation, as well as the type of immune response measured.

The SNS is also involved in lymphocyte trafficking and circulation, with different lymphocyte populations having differing sensitivities to catecholamines (19). For example, NK cells and granulocyte circulation are both increased by catecholamines, whereas B and T cell numbers remain relatively unaffected (5, 44). In addition, 6-OHDA-induced depletion of NE increases mitogen-induced proliferation of T, but not B cells (31). A previous report, however, has demonstrated reduced Con A-induced splenocyte proliferation after NE depletion via 6-OHDA *in vivo* (33). Sympathectomy can exert differential effects on mitogen-induced splenocyte proliferation, with reduced proliferation in sympathectomized animals in the presence of low doses of Con A, but increased proliferation at high doses (1). Furthermore, the effects of sympathectomy on mitogen-induced splenocyte proliferation appear to be strain dependent (31); thus differences between species are likely as well. Last, as discussed above, systemic 6-OHDA results in a global SNS depletion of NE; thus it is unclear whether the decreased proliferation after 6-OHDA-induced sympathectomy is due to a direct effect of NE removal on splenocytes or, rather, an indirect effect on other immunological factors (e.g., cytokines).

The concentrations of NE used in the present study were chosen because these doses have been shown previously to result in reliable inhibition of cellular proliferation (25). The use of a high physiological dose allowed us to be confident that we would not exclude potentially subtle effects of NE on proliferation, while at the same time it enabled us to assess a meaningful, biologically relevant physiological response. Given that the effects of NE on lymphocyte proliferation in short-day hamsters occurred at high but not low levels of NE,

however, it may be suggested that this effect is an artifact of potentially pharmacological levels of the neurotransmitter. Although we cannot totally rule out this possibility, we believe it is unlikely because the relatively high effective doses of NE used in these experiments are within the range of NE concentrations typically experienced within the local environment surrounding peripheral tissue (25). Regardless of whether the NE concentrations used in these studies are physiological or pharmacological, however, the results of the present demonstrate that splenocytes from short-day hamsters are more responsive to NE *in vitro* than long-day splenocytes.

Consistent with previous studies, the results of the present study suggest that the reduction in splenocyte proliferation in response to NE *in vitro* is a result of β -AR activity. For example, stimulation of β -AR can inhibit both mitogen- or anti-CD3 antibody-induced T cell proliferation (9, 23). Several subtypes of β -AR have now been identified, including β_1 -, β_2 -, and β_3 -AR subtypes (19). Based on radioligand binding studies, mature lymphocytes appear to express predominantly β_2 -AR (27), and this receptor subtype plays a primary functional role in regulating immune responses (reviewed in Ref. 42). For example, nonspecific β -AR agonists and selective β_2 - but not β_1 -agonists reduce interleukin-2 and γ -interferon production, as well as mitogen-induced lymphocyte proliferation (42). Although the present results suggest a role of β -AR in regulating NE-induced suppression of lymphocyte proliferation, the use of the nonspecific β -AR antagonist propranolol in the present study prevents us from determining the specific receptor subtype involved. Studies remain to be done that utilize subtype-specific antagonists and agonists and that will allow us to address these questions.

The results of the present study suggest that the SNS, and specifically NE, plays an important role in photoperiodic changes in lymphocyte proliferation. Furthermore, these results demonstrate that short days increase NE content within the spleen compared with long days. These data suggest that maintenance in short winterlike days increases SNS outflow to peripheral lymphoid tissues such as the spleen, supporting previous findings of short day-induced changes in SNS outflow to peripheral tissues in Siberian (49) and Syrian hamsters (46). The latter finding is particularly interesting in that SNS activity is decreased in short compared with long days in Syrian hamsters, a finding consistent with increased immune function reported in short days for this species. Thus it is possible that the differential effects of short days on SNS outflow may underlie the differences in photoperiodic effects on immunity reported for these hamster species, although this hypothesis requires testing. In the present study, increased SNS activity and concomitant increases in NE release in short days appear to act directly on β -AR on splenocytes to modulate lymphocyte proliferation. These data provide novel and important insights into the neuroendocrine mechanisms underlying environ-

mentally induced fluctuations in lymphocyte proliferation and likely immune function.

We acknowledge M. Dumler, A. Durazzo, K. Nies, and K. Proud for expert animal care.

DISCLOSURES

This research was supported by National Institutes of Health (NIH) Awards NS-10596 to G. E. Demas, DK-35254 to T. J. Bartness, MH-57535 to R. J. Nelson, as well as National Science Foundation Grant 00-0854 to R. J. Nelson.

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