Vascular mineralocorticoid receptor and blood pressure regulation
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The mineralocorticoid receptor (MR) is a major regulator of blood pressure by modulating sodium balance and blood volume in the distal nephron. The discovery of MR expression in both endothelial and vascular smooth muscle cells a decade ago raised questions about its role in the vascular wall and its involvement in blood pressure regulation. In vitro and in vivo pharmacological studies have shown that vascular MR is involved in several vascular properties such as extracellular matrix remodeling, inflammation and vascular reactivity. In this review, we focus on recent advances obtained using transgenic model with cell-specific modulation of the expression MR in endothelium or smooth muscle and their impact on blood pressure.

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Introduction
High blood pressure, or hypertension, represents a major risk factor of developing cardiovascular diseases [1] and is predicted to develop in 25% of the worldwide population during the next decade [2]. Thus, understanding the mechanisms leading to hypertension represents an important public health issue. Blood pressure levels are mainly determined by blood flow and vascular resistance. Blood flow depends on cardiac output and circulating volume, whereas vascular resistance is determined by vascular wall stiffness, which is the sum of an active stiffness (the contractile status of small arteries throughout the body) and passive stiffness (components of the vascular wall and extracellular matrix (ECM)) [3]. These determinants of blood pressure are subjected to a range of regulatory influences where the kidney has a pivotal role, by regulation of salt and water balance.

Among hormonal regulators for blood pressure, the role of the mineralocorticoid receptor (MR), a steroidal nuclear receptor has been highlighted for decades. Fifty years ago, the use of spironolactone, a mineralocorticoid receptor antagonist (MRA), was shown to decrease blood pressure in hypertensive patients [4] and then in several forms of hypertension [5]. Until the early 2000, it was commonly admitted that most of the pro-hypertensive effects of aldosterone and/or MR activation were related to their effects in epithelial cells of the aldosterone-sensitive distal nephron (ASDN), through the regulation of the renal sodium reabsorption and extracellular fluid volume. Since the discovery that MR is also expressed in non-epithelial tissues, and particularly in neurons and vessels [6–8], the question arise whether these non-classical targets are also involved in blood pressure regulation by aldosterone/MR. In this review, we focus on the vascular MR and its potential role in blood pressure control.

Vascular consequences of mineralocorticoid receptor antagonism
Pharmacological antagonists of MR (spironolactone, eplerenone) have beneficial effects on vascular tone and remodeling of vascular wall [9]. In experimental models, several studies have shown the beneficial effects of MRA on endothelial dysfunction induced by diabetes [10, 11], high-fat diet [12] or after myocardial infarction [13]. In diabetic patients, eplerenone improved coronary circulatory function [14]. In human hypertensive patients, MR inhibition improved flow-mediated dilation, a mechanism contributing to vascular tone in hypertension [15]. Eplerenone has been shown to prevent the potentiation of phenylephrine-induced contraction by aldosterone [16]. In an experimental model of rats treated with aldosterone, Lacolley et al. showed that eplerenone prevented the increase in blood pressure as well as pulse pressure and elastic modulus of large vessels [17], two markers of vascular stiffness, involved in hypertension. In patients with end-stage renal disease, MRA also had favorable effects on intima-media remodeling [19]. More recently, beneficial effects of spironolactone have been described in experimental models of pulmonary arterial hypertension (PAH), improving pulmonary vascular remodeling, right ventricular systolic pressure [20]...
and pulmonary artery systolic pressure [21]. In patients with PAH, spironolactone, associated with classical therapeutics, also present benefits with an amelioration of exercise tolerance and a decrease of B-type natriuretic peptide plasma concentration [22]. A recent study showed beneficial effect of spironolactone on coronary flow reserve in patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus [23]. Pharmacological inhibition of MR has also demonstrated beneficial effects such as increased lumen and outer diameters of the middle cerebral artery of spontaneously hypertensive stroke-prone rats [24,25] without modifying blood pressure. A recent study performed in rats showed that spironolactone administration completely prevented renal dysfunction characterized by a fall in renal blood flow and glomerular filtration rate associated to renal ischemia, without modifying mean arterial pressure [26].

The specific role of vascular MR into blood pressure regulation and the potential underlying mechanisms are difficult to assess using pharmacological approaches, due to two major limitations: i) MR blockade in vivo does not allow to dissociate the impact on renal epithelial cells from a direct effect on vascular function, and ii) the molecular and functional studies on isolated vessels do not permit to discriminate between endothelial and vascular smooth muscle cell effects. The use of transgenic mouse models allowing cell-specific modulation of MR expression recently helped to understand the specific role of MR in the vascular wall and its potential implication in blood pressure regulation.

Role of the endothelial mineralocorticoid receptor

MR expression has been evidenced in the endothelial cells of rabbit in the early 90 [27] and then confirmed few years later in human arteries [6], raising the question of MR function in the physiology and pathology of the endothelium. Of note, endothelial MR expression is increased in the microvasculature of spontaneously hypertensive SHR rats [28]. In the last four years, transgenic mouse models allowing cell-specific modulation of MR expression in the endothelium have been characterized.

Endothelial mineralocorticoid receptor overexpression

By using a mouse model with conditional and inducible endothelium-specific MR overexpression (VE-cadherin promoter), our group was the first to highlight the participation of endothelial MR in blood pressure regulation [29**]. These mice presented a mild (two fold) overexpression of the human MR (hMR) mRNA abundance in aorta and mesenteric arteries. The induction of endothelial hMR expression during embryonic development led to modest increase in systolic blood pressure (15 mmHg) in awake and anesthetized mice without modification of heart rate. Interestingly, the suppression of endothelial hMR overexpression in adult mice resulted in normalization of systolic blood pressure, mimicking the effect observed with a MRA (canrenone) [29**]. Renal epithelial MR does not mediate the rise in blood pressure since renal sodium handling, or extracellular volume in mice overexpressing endothelial MR, were unchanged [29**].

Endothelial hMR overexpression enhanced the blood pressure response to the acute infusion of two vasoconstrictors; angiotensin II (AngII) and endothelin 1 (ET1), and increased the contractility of mesenteric arteries to AngII and ET1 [29**]. Contractile responses to myogenic tone by phenylephrine, or U46619, a thromboxane receptor agonist, were also increased [29**]. Endothelial MR overexpression has no effects on endothelium-dependent or independent relaxation [29**]. These results suggest that endothelial MR overexpression participates to the increase of blood pressure through regulation of vascular reactivity in resistant vessel, without affecting vessel remodeling and renal sodium handling.

Endothelial mineralocorticoid receptor inactivation

Two recent studies focused on the cell-specific inactivation of MR in the endothelium. Rickard et al. [30*] reported the absence of implication of the endothelial MR (Tie2 promoter) in the increased systolic blood pressure induced by deoxycorticosterone–salt (DOCA–salt) treatment. Using a similar mouse model with endothelial MR inactivation (Tie2 promoter), Schafer et al. [12**] studied the consequence of endothelial MR inactivation after aldosterone infusion or diet-induced obesity. The authors showed that endothelial MR deletion blunted obesity-induced endothelial dysfunction. Unfortunately, blood pressure was not assessed in this study. Both studies therefore reported beneficial effects of endothelial MR inactivation on endothelial dysfunction (estimated as an altered dilatory response to acetylcholine) induced by high-fat diet or DOCA–salt challenge [12**,30*]. Interestingly, endothelial MR deletion prevented DOCA–salt induced endothelial dysfunction in aorta but not in mesenteric arteries, suggesting a distinct role in different vascular beds [30*].

Unlike endothelial overexpression, MR deletion in endothelium had no consequences on systolic blood pressure in basal conditions. However, the mechanisms whereby endothelial MR contributes to vascular reactivity need to be clarified.

Underlying mechanisms

At the molecular level, MR is involved in several functions of the endothelium, such as endothelial cell exocytosis of Weibel–Palade bodies containing pro-inflammatory cytokines [31], adhesion of inflammatory cells [6] and reactive oxygen species (ROS) production (Figure 1). MR activation alters the balance of ROS production through an increased activity of the NADPH oxidase [21] and a reduced degradation of ROS through decreased expression
MR-modulated pathways in endothelial cell. MR activation in the endothelial cells leads to pro-inflammatory status via expression of ICAM1 at the membrane and secretion of Weibel-Palade bodies (WPB) containing pro-inflammatory cytokines and Von Willebrand Factor. Endothelial MR also regulates the expression of several ion channels such KCa2.3, which participates to the Endothelial-Derived Hyperpolarizing Factor pathway, and the Na+ channel EnNaC, responsible for endothelial cortical stiffening and eNOS pathway inhibition. MR is also contributing to ROS production via the alteration of the balance between pro (NADPH-mediated) and anti-oxidative (G6PD-mediated) pathways. The increase of ROS is responsible for the decrease of NO bioavailability and ETB receptor activity via its sulfenylation. The selectivity of aldosterone is maintained due to the presence of the 11βHSD2, which catalyze glucocorticoids into non-active metabolites. 11βHSD2, 11β- hydroxysteroid dehydrogenase 2; ET R, Endothelin-1 Receptor; EnENA C, Endothelial Sodium Channel; eNOS, endothelial Nitric Oxide Synthase; G6PD, glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase; ICAM1, InterCellular Adhesion Molecule-1; MR, Mineralocorticoid Receptor; NADPH, nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide phosphate-oxidase; NO, Nitric oxide; ROS, Reactive Oxygen Species; WPB, Weibel–Palade Bodies.

and activity of the anti-oxidant enzyme glucose-6-phosphate dehydrogenase [32] (Figure 1). This then alters nitric oxide (NO) bioavailability, an important second messenger in endothelial cells. MR antagonism prevents the effects on oxidative stress and their consequences on vascular reactivity [32]. In pulmonary artery endothelial cells, the high production of hydrogen peroxide induced by MR activation is responsible for a sulfenic posttranslational modification of the Endothelin Receptor type-B leading to a reduced NO bioavailability in the pulmonary vasculature [21] (Figure 1). MR-dependent ROS production also impaired the differentiation and migration of bone marrow-derived Endothelial Progenitor Cells, which are crucial for endothelial repair and vascular homeostasis [33]. Ion channels may be direct MR targets involved in the functional consequences of MR activation in the endothelium. The Ca2+-activated K+ channel (KCa2.3) is upregulated in Human Umbilical Vein Endothelial Cells (HUVEC) by aldosterone, an effect blunted by spironolactone (Jaisser unpublished data). Indeed aldosterone induced KCa2.3 protein expression in the choroid vessels, an effect blunted by canrenoate, a MR antagonist [34] (Figure 1). We recently reported that the activity of KCa2.3 is mandatory to the vasodilatory effect of aldosterone in this vascular bed [34]. This may also occur in other vascular beds. Of note, it has been proposed that the Epithelial Sodium Channel (ENaC), a classical MR target in the ASDN, could also be regulated by aldosterone via MR in the endothelium [35,36]. Endothelial ENaC (EnNaC) contributes to the stiffening of endothelial cell [37] and to the activity of eNOS [38] (Figure 1). Whether MR-modulated pathways in the endothelium affect blood pressure required further studies.

Three studies using transgenic mice model of endothelial MR expression give some clues about the role of MR in blood pressure regulation. At basal state, the MR absence in endothelium has no consequences on blood pressure regulation. On the contrary, overexpression of endothelial MR leads to a moderate increase of blood pressure (15 mmHg) [29**]. This observation is interesting regarding pathological conditions where the MR can be over-activated. Since the participation of endothelium MR in blood pressure levels is moderate, others mechanisms can contribute to hypertension. One of the main information is that endothelial MR seems to participate to blood pressure regulation mainly through vascular reactivity. Overexpression increases vasoconstrictive pathways while inactivation
prevents endothelial dysfunction by the amelioration of vasodilation pathway. Endothelial MR modulation does not seem to act on vascular wall stiffness and remodeling but only via vascular reactivity. It is important to note that these transgenic models use different promoters to achieve endothelial specificity for MR expression/inactivation. Moreover, the Tie2-promoter has been described also to be active in hematopoietic cells [39], where a role of MR has already been described (like macrophages for example).

**Role of the vascular smooth muscle mineralocorticoid receptor**

The vascular smooth muscle cells (VSMC) are the major component of the vascular wall and play a crucial role in the regulation of vascular tone. MR is expressed in VSMC in physiological condition [7] and its expression is increased in aging rats [40]. Transgenic models with targeted MR overexpression in the VSCM have not been reported yet and we will only discuss the consequences of MR inactivation in VSCM.

**Vascular smooth muscle mineralocorticoid receptor inactivation**

The role of VSMC-MR was studied by using two different models of VSMC-specific MR gene inactivation [41**,42**]. In both cases, it has been reported that VSMC-MR is involved in blood pressure regulation without any modification in renal sodium handling. McCurley and collaborators [41**] used a mouse model allowing temporal and VSMC-specific inactivation of MR (smooth muscle actin promoter). The genetic inactivation of MR in adult (two months of age) mice prevented the increase in blood pressure induced by aging; five months later, mice presented lower (15 mmHg) systolic blood pressure. In a constitutive model of VSMC-specific MR inactivation (SM22 promoter), Galmiche et al. [42**] reported a similar basal blood pressure decrease in five-month-old MR KO mice. Interestingly, VSMC-MR inactivation prevented the \textit{in vivo} increase in blood pressure induced by AngII infusion [41**] but not by aldosterone-salt challenge [41**,42**]. Relaxation was not altered. Inactivation of VSMC-MR blunted the contractile response to pressure (myogenic tone), phenylephrine, AngII and to the thromboxane receptor agonist U46619, in aged mice only [41**]. Inactivation of VSMC-MR was also shown to decrease the contractile response to KCl and extracellular calcium (\(\text{Ca}^{2+}\)) [43].

**Underlying mechanisms**

The role of VSMC-MR in the contractile response could be explained by a decreased expression of L-type \(\text{Ca}^{2+}\) channel (Cav1.2) in aortas from VSMC-MR KO aged mice [41**] which may result in an altered \(\text{Ca}^{2+}\) signaling pathway in VSMC-MR KO cells (Figure 2). Indeed, Cav1.2 channel agonist BayK8644 had lower vasoconstrictive effects in mesenteric arteries from aged VSMC-MR

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**Figure 2**

MR-modulated pathways in vascular smooth muscle cells. MR activation in VSMC induces the expression of profibrotic molecules such as Collagen 1 or Galectin-3 involved in Extracellular Matrix Remodeling (ECM). MR also participates to the regulation of Integrin \(\alpha 5\) or Pit1, two proteins involved in vascular stiffening through cell adhesion tightening or calcification, respectively. MR also modulates the activity of the Cav1.2 calcium channel responsible for VSMC contraction. BMP2, Bone Morphogenetic Protein 2; Col1, Collagen 1; Gal3, Galectin-3; Lcn2, Lipocalin 2; MR, Mineralocorticoid Receptor; OPN, Osteopontin; Pit1, POU domain, class 1, transcription factor 1.
KO mice [41**]. The decreased Ca^{2+} signaling could in turn affect the contractile machinery activity. VSMC-MR KO exhibited reduced phosphorylation of Myosin Phosphatase-Targeting Subunit 1 (MYPT1), Myosin Light Chain Kinase (MLCK) and Myosin Light Chain 2 (MLC2) [43]. ENaC channel is also expressed in the VSMC and participates to myogenic tone [44]. Whether ENaC is regulated by MR in the VSMC like in the endothelium is unknown. In vitro MR activation in VSMC induced the expression of various pro-fibrotic markers [7,45–47]. In vivo studies showed that VSMC-MR plays a role in the remodeling of the extracellular matrix of the vascular wall as demonstrated using VSMC-KO mice with aldosterone-salt challenge [42*]. Molecular targeted modulated by MR in VSMC and involved in ECM remodeling include Galactin-3 (Gal3) [47], Osteopontin (OPN) [45] and Lipocalin 2 (Lcn2) [48] (Figure 2).

In pulmonary artery smooth muscle cells, MR activation induced the proliferation of smooth muscle cells, an effect prevented by spironolactone [20]. Smooth muscle MR is also involved in vascular calcification by regulating the expression of the phosphate transporter Pit1, which has an osteogenic function in the smooth muscle [49] (Figure 2). In human coronary artery SMC, MR activation by aldosterone upregulates the expression of genes implicated in vascular calcification, including Bone Morphogenetic Protein-2, Alkaline Phosphatase and Osteoprotegerin [7]. Indeed in vivo administration of spironolactone blunted the vascular calcification observed in the Klotho deficient mouse model [49]. The MR-mediated effects in VSMC may therefore contribute to long-term consequences of aging, vascular remodeling and stiffness on blood pressure.

Conclusion and perspectives
The use of transgenic models has shed a new light on the physiological and pathophysiological role of the vascular MR. Endothelial MR, as VSMC-MR, contributes to blood pressure. These observations suggest that vascular MR could contribute to blood pressure regulation, in addition to the epithelial MR in kidneys. How endothelial and VSMC-MR may act synergistically to affect blood pressure remains unknown. The underlying mechanisms by which vascular MR modulates blood pressure remains to be fully explored. Endothelial-MR and VSMC-MR participate into active stiffness of the vascular wall through modulation of vasoconstrictive and vasodilatory pathways. The participation of MR into vasoactive responses could be explained through the regulation of ion channels and ROS production observed in cellular models. VSMC-MR is also involved in the regulation of passive stiffness through the remodeling of the vascular wall such as VSMC proliferation, ECM remodeling or media calcification which could secondarily affect blood pressure levels.

Transgenic models with modulation of vascular MR expression will allow addressing some of the pending questions. One of them concerns the ligand that activates MR in the vascular wall (e.g., glucocorticoids and/or aldosterone, Figure 1). The enzyme 11βHSD2, responsible for the selectivity of aldosterone versus glucocorticoids for MR binding [50] is expressed in the endothelial cells while its expression in VSMC is questioned. Indeed, there are evidences that glucocorticoids can activate vascular MR in pathological conditions such as central serous chorioteninopathy [34]. Whether gender modulates the effects of vascular MR on blood pressure remains to be analyze. Of note Barrett Mueller et al. [51] recently reported that endothelial estrogen receptor modulates MR regulation of the pro-inflammatory gene ICAM-1. Whether other functions of MR in the vasculature are also modulated by ER signaling remains to be explored.

The role of the vascular MR could also depend on the vascular bed that is considered. While the implication of vascular MR expressed in resistant vessels has been addressed in recent studies, the role of MR in coronary vessels, cerebral and renal vasculature remains unknown. Whether MR activation in the renal vasculature (either in VSMC or endothelial cells) is involved in endothelial or renal dysfunction and its relation with the development of hypertension, remain unknown. The use of transgenic models will allow us to decipher the contribution of endothelial-MR and VSMC-MR in the different vascular bed and the possible implication in blood pressure regulation. Moreover, there is growing evidences of the participation of MR in the immune cells [52*,53]. Since endothelial MR activation promotes leukocyte-endothelial adhesion [6], possible interactions between immune and vascular MR activation could be involved into blood pressure regulation. Exciting developments in the field are expected, which will certainly deeply explore whether vascular MR has specific role in particular pathophysiological and clinical settings.

Conflict of interest statement
Nothing declared.

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References and recommended reading
Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

- of special interest
- of outstanding interest


The authors showed that the MR antagonist eplerenone blunted the endothelial dysfunction induce by High-Fat Diet. Using a mouse model with endothelial-specific MR deletion, they showed that endothelial MR participates to High-Fat Diet-induced endothelial dysfunction.

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Cardiovascular and renal


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The authors showed in a mouse model with endothelial-specific MR deletion that endothelial MR does not participate to DOCA–salt induced increase of blood pressure. However, endothelial MR deletion prevents endothelial dysfunction induced by DOCA–salt and prevents cardiac recruitment of leucocytes.