

Genetic pathway analysis reveals a major role for extracellular matrix organization in inflammatory and neuropathic pain

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Abstract

Chronic pain is a debilitating and poorly treated condition whose underlying mechanisms are poorly understood. Nerve injury and inflammation cause alterations in gene expression in tissues associated with pain processing, supporting molecular and cellular mechanisms that maintain painful states. However, it is not known whether transcriptome changes can be used to reconstruct a molecular pathophysiology of pain. In the current study, we identify molecular pathways contributing to chronic pain states through the analysis of global changes in the transcriptome of dorsal root ganglia, spinal cord, brain, and blood in mouse assays of nerve injury- and inflammation-induced pain. Comparative analyses of differentially expressed genes identified substantial similarities between 2 animal pain assays and with human low-back pain. Furthermore, the extracellular matrix (ECM) organization has been found the most commonly regulated pathway across all tested tissues in the 2 animal assays. Examination of human genome-wide association study data sets revealed an overrepresentation of differentially expressed genes within the ECM organization pathway in single nucleotide polymorphisms most strongly associated with human back pain. In summary, our comprehensive transcriptomics analysis in mouse and human identified ECM organization as a central molecular pathway in the development of chronic pain.

Keywords: Chronic pain, Next-generation sequencing, Differentially expressed genes, Extracellular matrix, GWAS, Bioinformatics

1. Introduction

Chronic pain is a debilitating condition that serves no obvious biological function, in contrast with acute pain triggered at injury, protecting the organism from further damage by activating withdrawal behaviors. More than 20% of the population worldwide suffer from chronic pain, making it the leading cause of disability in humans.⁵⁶ The mechanisms underlying the development of chronic pain are not well understood. Accordingly, available medications for chronic pain target the symptoms of the disease and not the

underlying pathology.⁶⁶ This treatment strategy results in inadequate pain relief under most circumstances and is accompanied by a high prevalence of side effects.^{23,49,69}

Two major types of pain states are inflammatory pain (IP), caused by tissue inflammation or injury, and neuropathic pain (NP), caused by damage to or dysfunction of the nervous system itself. Inflammatory pain and NP share several underlying neuronal mechanisms, including increased excitability of primary afferents, reduced spinal inhibitory tone, and the involvement of higher brain centers. Despite the progress in uncovering neuronal alterations along the pain pathway, the genetic programs and molecular mechanisms supporting these changes are not well known.

Preclinical studies in animal models have shown that pain states caused by inflammation or nerve injury are accompanied by massive changes in gene expression along the pain pathway, including in the dorsal root ganglion (DRG), spinal cord (SC), and supraspinal brain areas.^{25,29,30,72} Long-lasting changes in gene expression are believed to underlie the development of a sustained pain state by mediating the molecular and cellular mechanisms causing sensitization of peripheral and central pain circuits and the generation of ectopic discharge, both hallmarks of chronic pain.^{17,43,47} Complex pathophysiology of chronic pain assumes a model of multigene contribution to the reorganization of the somatosensory system in persistent pain states. Identification of these complex gene interactions and subthreshold contributions to pain phenotypes, as well as more global gene expression patterns, require unique bioinformatics approaches and the generation of high-quality gene expression data sets of different pain models and tissues.

Sponsorships or competing interests that may be relevant to content are disclosed at the end of this article.

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system branch, the clustering distinguished samples of the central nervous system (CNS: brain and SC) from the peripheral nervous system (PNS: DRG). In the CNS sub-branch, all SC samples clustered together, as did all brain samples. We verified that the first 2 clustering branches, nervous system vs blood, and CNS vs PNS were also present in the gene expression data of the same 4 tissues in humans (Fig. 1B, inset; microarray data from Ref. 5). Using the top 50 most DEGs, we performed within-tissue PCAs to assess that the 3 pain states—control, CFA, and SNI—were distinguishable in each tissue (Fig. 1C). Brain, SC, and DRG presented clear pain model distinctions with only 2 principal components, whereas blood presented a more complex pain profile, requiring higher dimensionality PCAs for better separation. In all, the first 2 PCAs can explain only 17% of within-tissue gene expression variance in the brain, while up to 32% of the variance was explained in the DRG.

2.2. Replication of published data

Next, we evaluated the replication of DEG patterns observed in our study with DEGs in various tissue–assay pairs from already-published data sets (Fig. 2; Table S9, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A719>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>; and Table S10, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A720>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>). We assessed all related genome-wide experiments for which data are available in NCBI's Gene Expression Omnibus and ready for prompt analyses with *geo2r*.^{15,19} Expression fold changes and associated *P*-values were converted into π -values for comparison with our work. We found 3 such data sets (Fig. 2). Data set GSE18803¹³ compares RNA expression data in SNI vs sham at day 7 after SNI in the SC of rats (Fig. 2A). Data set GSE15041⁶⁷ compares expression data in SNI vs sham in DRG at day 7 after SNI in rats (Fig. 2B). Finally, data set GSE38859⁵⁷

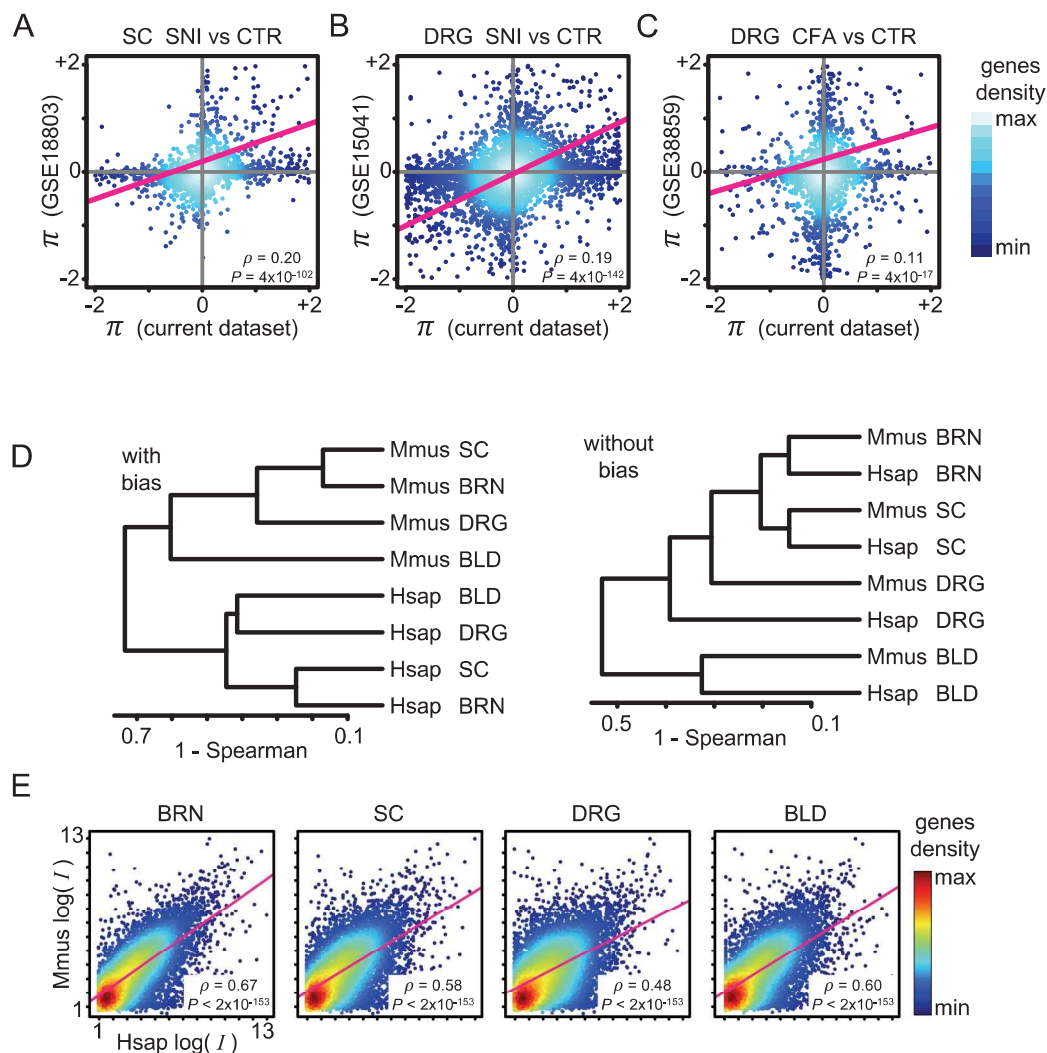


Figure 2. Correlation between the DEGs in current data set with previously published genome-wide rodent studies, and correlation between mouse and human transcriptomes. (A–C) DEG is measured as π -value. Each dot is a gene. Pink line obtained from linear regression. Correlation quantified using rank-based Spearman's coefficient (ρ) with accompanying *P*-value (*P*). Color coding suggests gene density. The corresponding tissues of current data set has been compared with (A) rat spinal cord 7 days SNI vs sham (GEO set GSE18803), (B) rats DRG ipsilateral 7 days SNI vs sham (GEO set GSE15041), and (C) rats DRG 3 days CFA vs sham (GEO set GSE38859). (D) Clustering of mouse (Mmus) and human (Hsap) transcriptomes. The clustering is based on Spearman's correlation coefficient of gene expression between pairs of transcriptomes. Unsupervised clustering leads to first branching by species, suggesting strong influence of species-specific transcriptomes (left panel). Removal of specie-specific transcriptomes leads to pairings by tissue types instead (right panel). (E) Transcriptome gene expression correlation by tissue type between human and CTR mouse. For each tissue, rank-based Spearman's coefficient (ρ) and *P*-value (*P*) are shown. Each dot is a gene. Colour coding suggests gene density. Pink line obtained from linear regression. Mouse RNA-Seq gene expression has been log₂ transformed to match human microarray log-based gene expression intensity (I). CFA, complete Freund's adjuvant; DEG, differentially expressed gene; DRG, dorsal root ganglion; SNI, spared nerve injury

compares expression data in CFA vs sham at day 3 in rats (**Fig. 2C**). Because these data sets were compiled using rats, we expected limited replication of DEGs because of interspecies gene expression differences (Table S9, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A719>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>; **Fig. 2**). Furthermore, different quantified platforms were used, ie, RNA-Seq for mouse and microarray for rat. In all 3 genome-wide replication attempts, nevertheless, rank-based Spearman correlation coefficients ranged from 0.11 to 0.20, with accompanying P -values between 10^{-17} and 10^{-142} .

Analysis of summary data from a previously published large meta-analysis of DEGs from multiple microarray studies of pain³⁰ was then used to further quantify replication between our findings and previously published data (Table S10, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A720>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>). The meta-analysis compiled studies that were performed using both mice and rats. It identified a total of 79 genes with significant expression fold change in at least 4 independent microarray experiments. Details of neuropathic and inflammation pain assays were also slightly differing (eg, SNI vs chronic constriction injury). Replication of the surveyed genes yielded a total of 65 committed fold change calls, for which a total of 57 calls agree on the direction of the fold change, thus generating 8 mismatched calls. The P -value for this level of success rate, assuming probability to make a correct fold change direction call is one-half (1/2), was evaluated using the hypergeometric test that yielded $P = 3.2 \times 10^{-10}$. Thus, our deep-sequencing data were of high-quality and replicated previous studies.

2.3. Relevance of mouse transcriptome study for humans

We next examined the relevance of using mouse transcriptome data to gain knowledge about humans. A data set containing human gene expression data in the same 4 tissues probed herein⁵ allowed for a direct comparison of transcriptomes between control mice and humans, on a per-tissue basis (**Fig. 2**). Unsupervised clustering of the transcriptomes yielded a dendrogram in which the tissues did not cluster by type, but rather by species (**Fig. 2D**, left panel). Removal of species-specific expressed genes and retaining of genes expressed in both species yielded an unsupervised clustering in which tissues clustered by identity (**Fig. 2D**, right panel). In all cases, blood was distinguishable from nervous tissues, and CNS (brain and SC) clustered together apart from PNS (DRG). Comparison of transcriptomes on a per-tissue basis was also performed (**Fig. 2E**). All rank-based correlations of gene

expression were statistically significant, with P -values below an estimated 2.2×10^{-16} . Spearman correlation coefficients varied from 0.48 in DRG to 0.67 in the brain, indicating strong correspondences between human and mouse transcriptomes, in each tissue. Once again, because the transcriptomes have been quantified using different technologies (RNA-Seq for mouse and microarray for human), it is expected that at least some differences in gene expression arose from the varying accuracies and signal-to-noise ratios of the platforms, notwithstanding species-specific gene expression.

2.4. Relevance of differential gene expression in mouse pain models to humans with clinical condition

Our mouse data were further correlated with a complex human pain state, namely back pain. As it has been shown previously that back pain patients manifest symptoms with both neuropathic and inflammatory components,²⁰ we compared DEGs in blood of humans with back pain to DEGs in blood in both neuropathic and inflammatory mouse pain models (**Fig. 3**). Very significant correlations were observed for both comparisons; however, in the mouse NP model, this correlation was stronger (**Fig. 3A**; Spearman $\rho = 0.47$, $P = 5 \times 10^{-110}$) than in the mouse inflammation pain model (**Fig. 3B**; Spearman $\rho = 0.33$, $P = 3 \times 10^{-39}$). When genes were grouped by pathways, 80% of differentially expressed pathways in humans displayed correlation coefficients with SNI equal to or greater than 0.35, whereas only 40% of CFA differentially expressed pathways showed correlation coefficients equal or greater than 0.35 (**Fig. 3C**). Thus, we observed both a neuropathic and an inflammatory component at the level of DEGs and differentially expressed pathways in the human back pain profile. However, in this back pain cohort, the neuropathic component was stronger (Kolmogorov–Smirnov $P < 2 \times 10^{-16}$).

2.5. Genome-wide analysis of differentially expressed genes in pain assays

We then established the full list of genes differentially expressed in each of the 4 tissues, and for each of the 2 pain assays (**Fig. 4**; Table S11, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A721>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>). In the CFA assay, the number of DEGs varied from 1123 in the brain to 2642 in SC (**Fig. 4A**). A large proportion of DEGs are tissue-specific, and there were only 48 genes that are differentially expressed in all tissues in the CFA assay. In SNI, the number of DEGs varied from

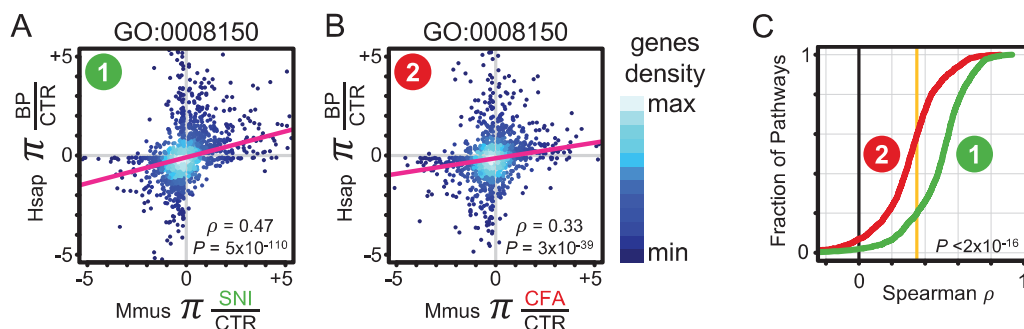


Figure 3. Comparison of differential gene expression in human clinical pain conditions and mouse pain assays. (A and B) Gene expression profile in the blood of human subjects (Hsap) with back pain (BP) were contrasted (π) against those with no pain (CTR). Gene expression profiles in the blood of mice (Mmus) under a pain assay were contrasted (π) against those in the control group (CTR). Each dot is a gene in GO's biological process pathway (GO:0008150). Colour coding reflects gene density. Pink line obtained from linear regression. Rank-based Spearman's correlation coefficient ρ and associated P -value (P) are shown. (A) Spared nerve injury pain assays. (B) Complete Freund's adjuvant pain assay. (C) Cumulative fraction of all GO's biological process pathways as a function of their Spearman's ρ . Kolmogorov–Smirnov test P -value between the 2 curves is shown. Black vertical line indicates $\rho = 0$, while gold vertical line $\rho = 0.35$, CFA, complete Freund's adjuvant; SNI, spared nerve injury.

968 in brain up to 3194 in DRG (Fig. 4B), but only 18 genes were differentially expressed in all 4 tissues.

Differential expression of genes was found conserved between tissues. For CFA, all regression slopes were positive, and percent variance explained (PVE) varied between 1% and 11% (Fig. 4C). For SNI, we also found positive regression slopes (except for one), while PVE varied between 0% and 8% (Fig. 4D). Most correlated tissue pair in CFA was between DRG and blood (PVE 11%), while in SNI between DRG and SC (PVE 8%).

Furthermore, there was a large overlap in DEGs between CFA and SNI. The percentage of shared DEGs was found to range from 24% in the brain up to 44% in SC (Fig. 4E). Unexpectedly, these DEG overlaps within tissues for different pain assays were substantially higher in magnitude than between tissues within one pain model. The large number of shared DEG points to possible common pathways that are activated by inflammation (CFA) and

nerve injury (SNI). All tissues considered, as much as 49% of DEGs, were shared between CFA and SNI.

In addition, of the 800 genes already characterized in the context of pain research (see Materials and Methods for source details), a total of 452 known pain genes (56% of the total 8687 DEGs in our assays overlapped (Fig. 4F; Table S12, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A722>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>). This represents a 3.1-fold overrepresentation of observed known differentially expressed pain genes over what would be expected by chance alone, with associated enrichment P -value of 2×10^{-129} .

2.6. Tissue-specific pathways involved in distinct pain processes

We next developed a star plot that tracks differential expression in each mouse pain assay, for each gene, in a tissue-based manner

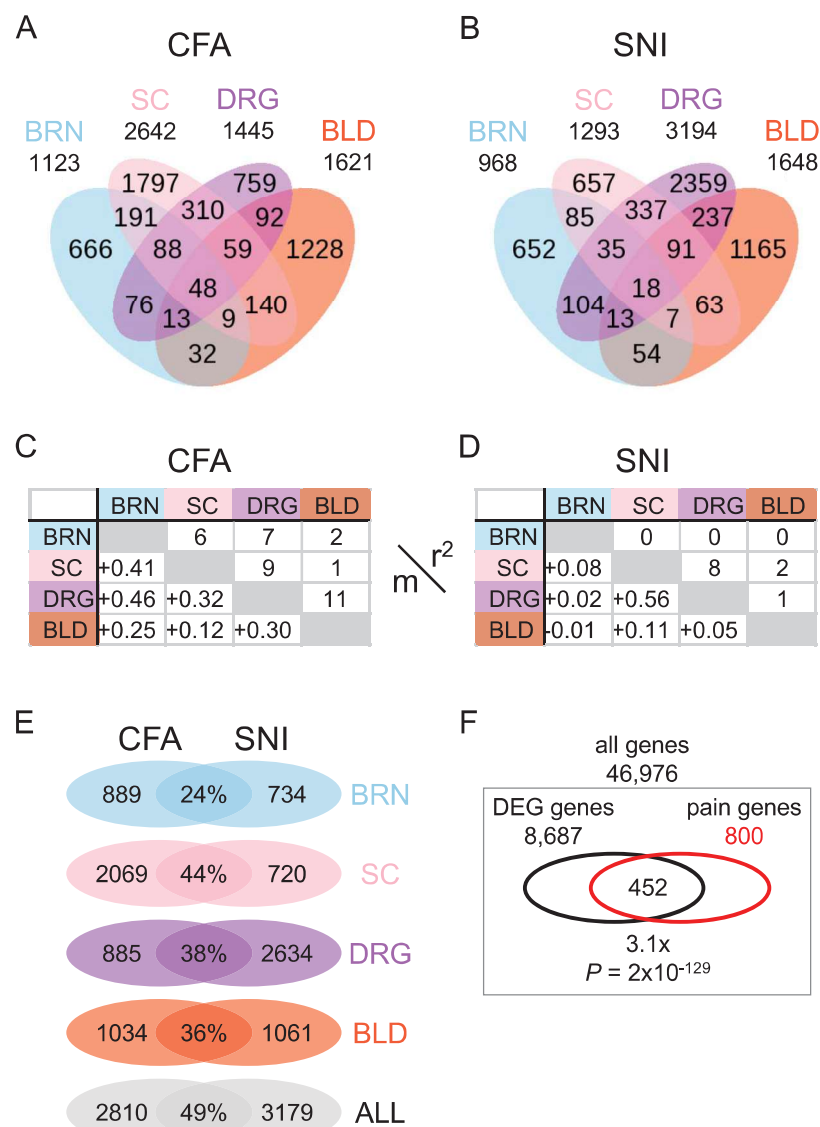


Figure 4. Differentially expressed genes in pain assays and in pain-relevant tissues. (A and B) Four-way Venn diagram showing shared DEGs between tissues in CFA (A) or SNI (B) pain assays. (C and D) Linear regression of DEGs for all tissue pairs. Shown are percent variance explained (Pearson's r^2) rounded to nearest integer (upper right corner), and regression's slope (m) with slope's sign emphasized (lower left corner), for CFA (C) or SNI (D) pain assays. (E) Two-way Venn diagrams showing shared DEGs between CFA and SNI pain assays, for each tissue, and all tissues combined (ALL). Counts at intersection expressed as percentage of the smallest values between the 2 tissue-specific DEGs counts. (F) Two-way Venn diagram showing overlap of DEGs in any tissue or pain mouse assay vs those known to contribute to pain states. Shown at the bottom is observed to expected enrichment ratio (x) of number of DEG among known pain genes, with accompanying P -values. CFA, complete Freund's adjuvant; DEGs, differentially expressed genes; SNI, spared nerve injury

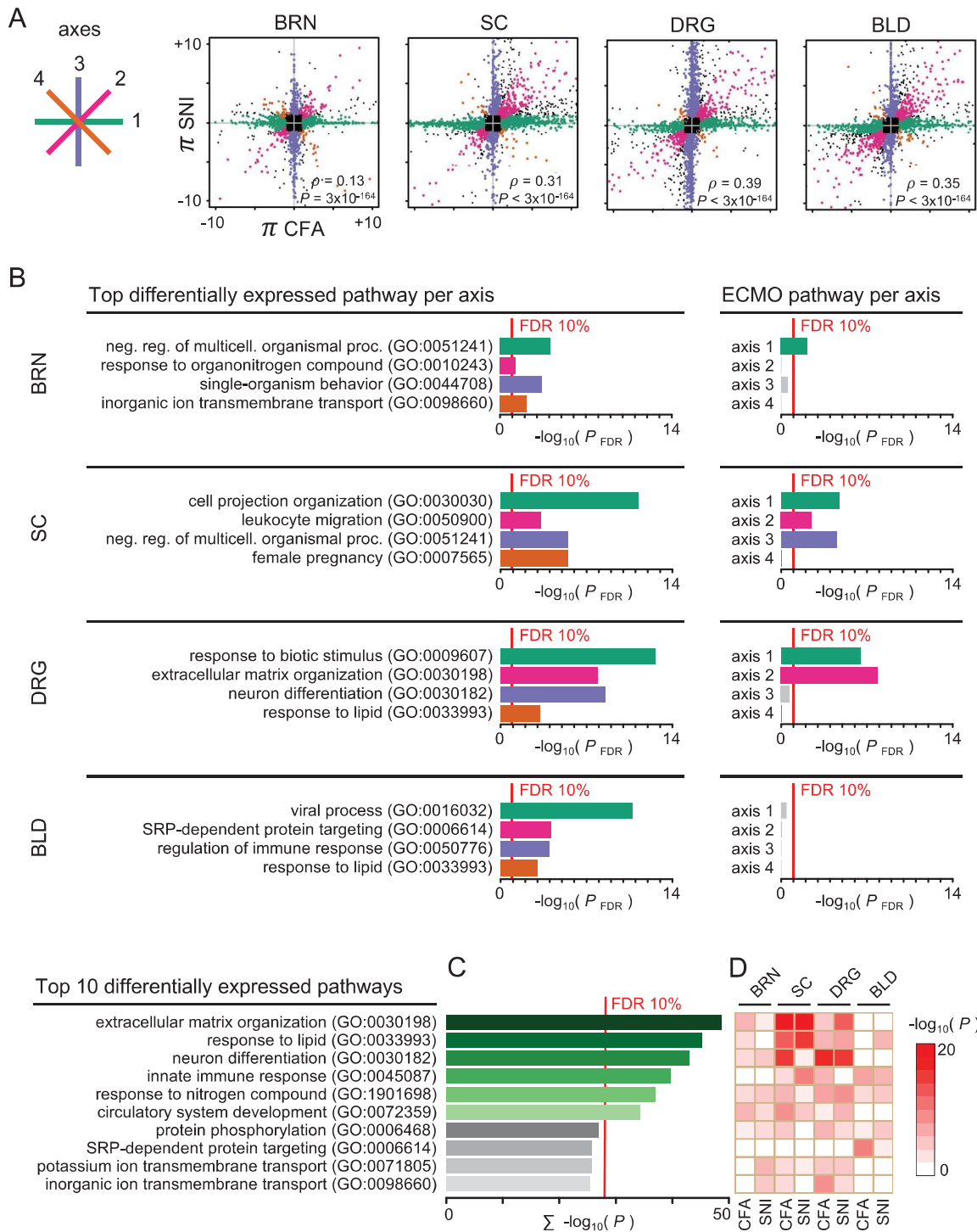


Figure 5. Tissue-specific pathways contributing to distinct pain processes. (A) Star plots depict DEGs between CFA and SNI pain assays, in a tissue-specific manner. Each dot is a gene. Four axes are defined and colored accordingly: CFA-only DEGs (axis 1, green), DEGs correlated between CFA and SNI models (axis 2, pink), SNI-only DEGs (axis 3, purple), and DEGs anticorrelated between CFA and SNI models (axis 4, orange). (B) For each tissue's axes, the pathway with the best FDR-corrected GSEA P -value is shown in a bar plot (left). Vertical red lines mark statistical significance at FDR 10% level. Also shown is the ECM organization pathway (GO:0030198, right). (C) Bar plot showing top 10 differentially expressed pathways, summed over all axes of all tissues. Vertical red lines mark statistical significance at FDR 10% level. (D) Heatmap of contribution of each tissue (top) and pain models (bottom) to the top 10 differentially expressed pathways. CFA, complete Freund's adjuvant; DEG, differentially expressed gene; ECM, extracellular matrix; GSEA, gene set enrichment analyses; SNI, spared nerve injury.

(Fig. 5). We defined each star plot by the 4 axes representing the correlation between DEGs in SNI and CFA assays (Fig. 5A; and Fig. S5, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A710>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>). The star plot helped highlight genes that were coregulated between CFA and SNI, again accentuating shared pathophysiology; rank-based Spearman correlations varied

from 0.13 in the brain to 0.39 in DRG. The lists of genes identified from the star plots allowed for gene set enrichment analyses (GSEA) (Table S13, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A723>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>). The pathway that showed the most significant enrichment P -value is reported for each of the 4 axes, in each tissue-based star plot (Fig. 5B).

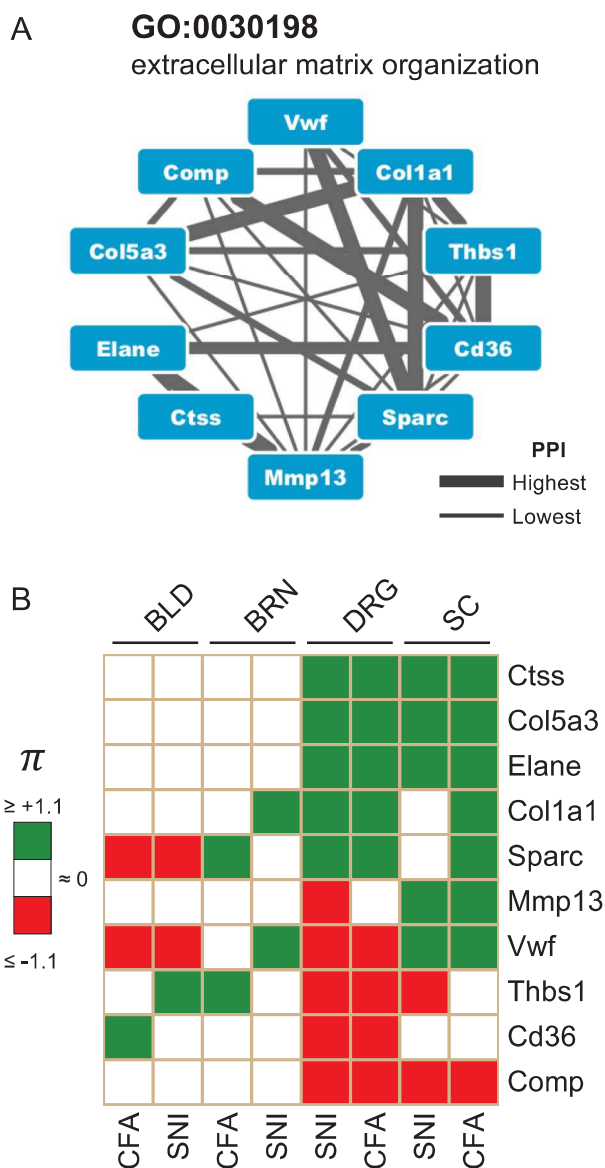


Figure 6. Protein–protein interaction network of the ECM organization pathway. (A) Top 10 genes most differentially expressed in the ECM organization pathway, organized in a protein–protein interaction (PPI) network. Edge confidence, from highest to lowest, is proportional to experimental evidence for interacting protein pair as provided in the STRING database. Genes are CD36 molecule (thrombospondin receptor)—*Cd36*; collagen, type I, alpha 1—*Col1a1*; collagen, type V, alpha 3—*Col5a3*; cartilage oligomeric matrix protein—*Comp*; cathepsin S—*Ctss*; elastase, neutrophil expressed—*Elane*; matrix metalloproteinase 13 (collagenase 3)—*Mmp13*; secreted protein, acidic, cysteine-rich (osteonectin)—*Sparc*; thrombospondin 1—*Thbs1*; and von Willebrand factor—*Vwf*. (B) Heatmap of expression fold change of the top 10 genes across all tissues (top) and pain models (bottom). Expression fold change is measured in π -value units and dichotomized: increased expression compared with control is in green, while decreased is in red. ECM, extracellular matrix

Further analyses for pathway enrichment yielded a list of top 10 differentially expressed pathways, summed over all axes of all tissues (Fig. 5C). The ECM organization pathway emerged as the top differentially expressed pathway (GO:0030198). The ECM organization pathway is a biological process that manages the assembly, maintenance, and disassembly of the ECM. We find this pathway to be enriched in 6 different axes (of 16) (Fig. 5B): in brain in CFA; in SC, axes 1, 2, and 3; and in DRG, axes 1 and 2. Importantly, when ECM organization seemed significantly enriched in 2 different axes of the same tissue, 2 nonoverlapping

subsets of genes of these axes contribute to it (Table S13, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A723>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>).

The top 10 differentially expressed pathways were then re-examined for their impact on tissues and pain assays (Fig. 5D). Tissues of the nervous system (brain, SC, and DRG) showed the greatest contributions from the ECM organization pathway, in both CFA and SNI.

2.7. Gene network in the extracellular matrix organization pathway

We next identified the top 10 most DEGs in the ECM organization pathway from their impact, defined as the sum of $|\pi|$ values from all assays and all tissues of differential expression (Fig. 6). Proteins encoded by these genes were found to be in a highly-connected network of protein–protein interactions (Fig. 6A, STRING database⁵⁹). The proposed network is quality-controlled, built on experimental evidence, text mining, and knowledge transfer between species for orthologous pairs.⁷⁰ In the network, all proteins displayed moderate-to-strong evidence of interaction to at least one other protein in the network. We found differential expression of these genes to be tissue- and assay-specific, although it could reflect timing of their differential expression (Fig. 6B). Dorsal root ganglion and SC tissues displayed the most differential expression of these genes. Clustering of the genes suggested that *Thbs1*, *Cd36*, and *Comp* were mostly down-regulated, whereas the other 7 proteins were mostly up-regulated. We observed that the brain featured the least number of DEGs, whereas the highest number of DEGs was in the DRG. Interestingly, a search in the GeneRIF database⁴⁰ for co-occurrences of the gene's name and “pain” revealed that many of the ECM organization genes in the network are already characterized in the context of pain research: *Sparc*,^{39,60} *Col1a1*,^{1,33} *Mmp13*,⁶⁴ *Ctss*,^{8,10,11,34,76,77} *Elane*,^{68,78} and *Comp*.^{16,28}

2.8. Human genome-wide association study results on back pain are enriched for genes in extracellular matrix organization pathway

We next examined the correlation of our mouse DEGs data with genome-wide association study (GWAS) pain data sets. We tested for overrepresentation of single nucleotide polymorphisms (SNPs) from GWAS data sets within human orthologues of mouse DEGs in the set of SNPs with strongest association with back pain (Fig. 7; and Fig. S6, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A710>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>).

We applied this methodology to analyze GWAS results for human back pain, the most common human musculoskeletal pain condition. We used data from the UK Biobank project, for which genotyping and medical records were collected for about 500,000 people.^{2,58} Enrichment analyses showed that SNPs within the genes that are differentially expressed in CFA/SNI are overrepresented in top differentially expressed pathways (Fig. 7). A heatmap shows which tissues and pain assays exhibit the highest association with the human back pain phenotype. For the ECM organization pathway, genes differentially expressed in the brain and in the SC in an inflammation profile, and in DRG in a neuropathic profile, showed marked enrichment of top GWAS SNPs in these genes.

3. Discussion

To further our understanding of pain processes at the molecular level, and to assess in an unbiased fashion the potential roles of

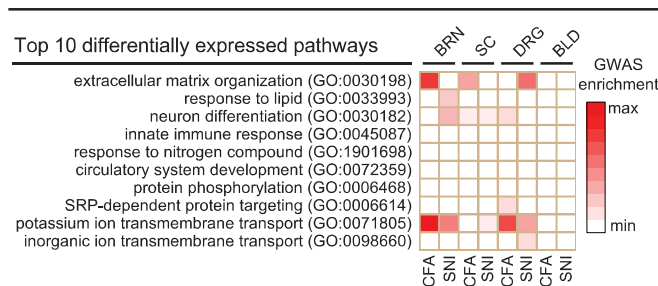


Figure 7. Enrichment of SNPs in back pain GWAS for the ECM organization pathway. Heatmap shows an enrichment of SNPs with strongest association with human back pain condition in loci of genes whose orthologs in mice are differentially expressed in experimental pain assays. The results are presented for the top 10 differentially expressed pathways in a tissue-specific fashion (top) and in a pain-specific fashion (bottom). ECM, extracellular matrix; GWAS, genome-wide association study.

contributing biological processes, we performed genome-wide next-generation transcriptomics analyses of pain-relevant tissues in 2 mouse pain assays (Fig. 1). This approach provides a deep analysis of transcriptomics of pain states. An alternative single-cell sequencing approach generates a detailed picture of changes in various cell types at the transcriptome level. However, a compromise is made between the number of samples and the sequencing depth or coverage. Typical results of single-cell analyses report expression data for only about 3500 genes (with large SDs),⁶⁵ a direct consequence of the sequencing depth of about 2×10^5 mapped reads per sample.²⁴ The deep sequencing obtained in our study (10^7 mapped reads compared to 10^5) allows for detecting low expressed genes, but most importantly, to assign statistical significance of minute differences in expression fold changes even in the mixed-cell-type population. Once identified, genes of interest can be checked for expression in specific cell types in single-cell sequencing resources, in DRG,⁶⁵ or in SC.²⁴

We performed pathway analysis of DEGs across tissues and assays. We identified several pathways known to be involved in pain mediation, such as response to lipids, neuron differentiation, and innate immune response. Strikingly, the most regulated pathway in our analysis was ECM organization. The top 10 DEGs within the ECM organization category encode proteins with diverse functions including structural proteins such as collagen and cartilage components (*Col5a3*, *Comp*, *Col1a1*, and *Sparc*), proteins involved in cell-to-cell and cell-to-matrix interactions (*Vwf*, *Thbs1*, and *Cd36*), and enzymes involved in ECM remodeling (*Ctss*, *Elane*, and *Mmp13*). The observed diversity in DEGs within the ECM suggests that identification of the ECM organization as the most commonly regulated pathway in pain assays reflects a central role of this biological domain as a whole and is not related to a specific protein or group of proteins.

After identifying the top 10 biological pathways associated with pain states in mouse assays, we attempted to correlate these data with human GWAS of back pain (Fig. 7). We observed overrepresentation of the genes corresponded to the top SNPs of the back pain GWAS results within the ECM organization pathway. The statistical enrichment was observed for the SNPs situated within the genes identified in the inflammatory assay, detected both in the brain and in the SC, and in the neuropathic assay, detected in the DRG. Thus, we obtained evidence for a major contribution of the ECM organization pathway to the molecular pathophysiology of back pain and identified critical elements of this contribution at multiple levels: (1) the top associated SNPs, from the human GWAS, (2) the contributing

genes in which these SNPs reside, (3) the contributing pathways, as genes are organized in modules, (4) the tissues in which transcriptional changes and responses occur, and (5) the type of contributing pain profile, inflammation, or neuropathic. Although the association analysis was restricted to 10 pathways, it recognized a new genetic pathway contributing to human back pain and was able to identify combined impacts of individual SNPs despite their modest effect sizes. Most of the DEGs within the ECM organization pathway in the mouse assays of pain state were detected in the dorsal horn of the SC and DRG tissues, with some DEGs also observed in the brain. We thus anticipate that ECM remodeling detected from expression profiling would impact behavior at the whole organism level.¹²

The ECM is composed of a variety of structural proteins, creating the extracellular scaffold surrounding cells in the tissue.^{7,42} It also includes molecules mediating cell-cell and cell-matrix interaction, and enzymes involved in ECM remodeling. In the nervous system, ECM components provide not only the structural support for neuronal and nonneuronal cells, but also regulate synapse formation and function, and modulate neuronal excitability.^{4,46,52} In the cortex, hippocampus, and amygdala, the ECM has been demonstrated to restrict neuroplasticity by inhibiting activity-dependent structural reorganization of presynaptic and postsynaptic compartments,⁵⁵ suppressing the lateral mobility of AMPA receptors in the membrane²¹ and modulating neuronal excitability.⁴ Accordingly, disruption of the ECM enhanced synaptic plasticity, acquisition of memories, and cognitive flexibility and extinction.^{46,50,71,74} Despite this progress in the understanding key roles of ECM in synaptic plasticity and memory formation, the role of the ECM in regulation of nociceptive circuits and the development of chronic pain is not well known.

Removal of inhibitory constraints is a paramount mechanism to increase the excitability of nociceptive circuits in pathological pain conditions.^{14,45} Repeated or intense activation of sensory neurons in response to peripheral tissue injury leads to a long-lasting increase in the excitability of SC circuits (a process known as central sensitization), resulting in a significant amplification of peripheral inputs. Although central sensitization results from a combination of mechanisms, the most prominent one is a reduction of inhibitory tone. Several mechanisms have been proposed to mediate the reduction of inhibitory tone in the SC in pathological pain conditions, including (1) decreased expression of neuron-specific K^+Cl^- cotransporter-2 (*KCC2*) in spinal neurons, leading to a change in chloride gradient, and thereby attenuated inhibitory synaptic currents in response to GABA/glycine¹⁴; (2) decrease in the activity of spinal inhibitory neurons⁶²; and, (3) reduced descending inhibition.⁴⁴ In light of our results and previous studies in the cortex and hippocampus, disinhibition of ECM-mediated suppression of spinal and peripheral pain circuits might be a novel potential mechanism promoting painful hypersensitive states. Modulation of ECM composition and density could impact nociception not only by direct effect on neuronal activity but also through T-cell and macrophage infiltration, as well as nerve and blood vessel sprouting, all factors potentially contributing to chronic pain.²⁶

We noted a number of limitations of this study. A single mouse sex was used in our study to simplify interpretation and reduce heterogeneity, given well-known sex differences in pain processing.⁴¹ Female mice were chosen since women represent the clear majority of chronic pain patients.⁴¹ Furthermore, we compared transcriptomics of mice subjected to chronic inflammation and nerve injury with matching home cage controls and not vehicle/sham groups. This experimental design is suboptimal for animal preclinical studies, but because we were comparing mouse data

sets with human transcriptomics and GWAS, we reasoned that this approach would generate data that better match human pain studies, where healthy individuals serve as controls. Finally, we used adult mice (18 weeks) to better mimic the situation in human population where the disease is more common in adults. However, further aging mice may display yet unique molecular processes in pain assays, reflecting aging human aging processes. Recognizing our limitations, we stressed that we consider our results as a discovery that is needed to be followed up and replicated in different populations, including males and older mice, and different conditions, including better differentiating between pain and injury.

In summary, our catalog of genes differentially expressed in 2 mouse pain assays will be a valuable resource for the pain research field, enabling study of the molecular basis underlying pain processing. We showed that changes in transcriptome in neuropathic and IP states in animal models display substantial overlap between each other and with human LBP. Thus, these results capture shared molecular pathophysiological mechanisms between neuropathic and IP states. Furthermore, these results validate mouse pain assays for studying human pain conditions, although this does not exclude or quantify species specificity in pain mechanisms. Finally, and most importantly, we identified the ECM organization pathway as a major contributor to both pain etiologies, including its major contribution to risk of developing back pain at the level of human genetic variability.

4. Materials and methods

4.1. Statistics

Statistical tests used are indicated where the tests are performed. Correction for multiple testing is applied whenever multiple tests were involved, along with a statement indicating which method of correction is used, based on a fair assessment of how correlated the multiple tests are (eg, Bonferroni, Benjamini–Hochberg or FDR, etc). Threshold for statistical significance is P -value ≤ 0.05 for each test, unless specifically indicated at the location of the test.

4.2. Animals

For whole transcriptome studies, nine 18-week-old BALB/c female mice were randomly assigned into 3 groups of 3 mice: (1) control (CTR, naive), (2) IP induced with CFA, and (3) SNI for modelling NP. For chondroitinase ABC studies, both male and female mice were used. All animals used in this experiment were bred on site, and littermates were introduced into the study as soon as they matured to 8 weeks of age. All mice were housed in standard polycarbonate cages in groups of 3 or 4 same sex, in a temperature-controlled ($20 \pm 1^\circ\text{C}$) environment (14:10-hour light/dark cycle; lights on at 07:00 hours); tap water and food (Harlan Teklad 8604; Teklad Diets, Madison, WI) were available ad libitum.

4.3. Mouse pain assays

4.3.1. Complete Freund's adjuvant assay

Complete Freund's adjuvant (50%; Sigma) was injected subcutaneously in a volume of 20 μL into the left and right plantar hind paws using a 100- μL microsyringe with a 30-gauge needle. Three days after CFA, mice were decapitated, and blood was collected along with the brain and cerebellum, DRG (ipsilateral L3–L5), and ipsilateral dorsal horn of SC. Blood was collected in RNAprotect Animal Blood tubes (Qiagen, Germantown, MD) and

stored according to manufacturer's recommendations. Blood and tissue samples were kept at -80°C until RNA extraction.

4.3.2. Spared nerve injury assay

Spared nerve injury, an experimental nerve injury designed to produce NP, was performed under isoflurane/oxygen anesthesia as described previously.⁵⁴ Briefly, using an operating microscope ($\times 40$), the 3 terminal branches of the sciatic nerve (tibial, sural, and common peroneal) were exposed. The tibial and common peroneal nerves were cut, after tight ligation with 6.0 silk, "sparing" the sural nerve. The incisions were closed in layers using interrupted sutures (6-0 Vicryl) and wound clips. The animal recovered on a thermostatically controlled heating pad (carefully monitored to prevent overheating) until ambulatory as per standard operating procedures. To reduce the overall number of mice required, the SNI surgery was performed in a bilateral fashion (ie, left and right side). Seven days after the surgery, blood and other tissues (L3–L5 DRG, dorsal horn of the SC, and brain) were collected and stored as for CFA-treated mice.

4.3.3. Von Frey testing

The up–down method of Dixon⁹ was used to estimate 50% withdrawal thresholds using nylon monofilaments (Stoelting Touch Test), calibrated monthly. All experiments took place during the light cycle, between 9:00 and 16:00 hours. Mice were placed in custom-made Plexiglas cubicles ($5 \times 8.5 \times 6$ cm) on a perforated metal floor and were permitted to habituate for at least 1 hour before testing. Filaments were applied to the plantar surface of the hind paw for 1 second, and responses were recorded. Two consecutive measures were taken on each hind paw at each time point and averaged. Curves were plotted using GraphPad Prism v.7.

4.4. RNA extraction

Total RNA from nervous tissues was isolated using RNeasy Lipid Tissue Mini Kit, whereas RNA from blood cells was isolated using the RNeasy Mini Kit, including DNaseI treatment (all from Qiagen), according to the manufacturer's instructions. Total RNA was quantified using the NanoDrop 2000 (Thermo Scientific), and the RNA quality was assessed with the 2100 Bioanalyzer (Agilent Technologies).

4.5. Whole transcriptome sequencing (RNA-Seq)

All RNA-sequencing procedures were performed by Genomics Platform facility (Institute for Research in Immunology and Cancer, Montreal, Canada). Transcriptome libraries were generated from 1 μg of total RNA using the Kapa RNA-stranded Sample Prep Kit (KK8400; KAPABiosystems) following the manufacturer's protocols. Briefly, poly-A mRNA was purified using poly-T oligo-attached magnetic beads using 2 rounds of purification. During the second elution of the poly-A RNA, the RNA was fragmented and primed for cDNA synthesis. During cDNA synthesis, dUTP was incorporated in the second-strand synthesis, where dUTP-containing strand was selectively degraded. Adenylation of the 3' ends and ligation of adapters were performed after the manufacturer protocol. Enrichment of DNA fragments that have adapter molecules on both ends was performed using 10 cycles of PCR amplification using the KAPA PCR mix and Illumina-adapted primers cocktail.

4.6. Sequencing

Paired-end (2×100 bp) sequencing was performed using the Illumina HiSeq2000 machine running TruSeq v3 chemistry. Details of the Illumina sequencing technologies can be found at <https://www.illumina.com/techniques/sequencing/rna-sequencing.html>.

4.7. Processing of RNA-Seq data

RNA-Seq data have been trimmed with Trimmomatic v0.32,⁶ then mapped on UCSC's mouse genome version mm10 (grabbed from ftp://ussd-ftp.illumina.com/Mus_musculus/UCSC/mm10/) using tophat v2.0.11²⁷ and bowtie v1.0.0.³² Differential gene expression detected at gene level from experimental triplicates using cuffdiff v2.2.1.⁶³ The RNA-Seq data have been deposited in NCBI's Gene Expression Omnibus¹⁹ and are accessible through GEO accession number GSE111216. We used a level of statistical significance at alpha 0.05 to define DEGs $|t| \geq$ critical value of 1.11.⁷³ Gene names from HUGO Gene Nomenclature Committee (HGNC).⁷⁵

RNA fragment raw counts ranged from 61 M to 195 M, with an average of 93 M reads (SD of 30 M) (Fig. S2, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A710>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>). After adapter trimming, the 100 nts paired-end reads had a mean length of 94 nts (SD of 13 nts), retaining the specificity of paired-end sequencing. The average ratio of mapped to trimmed reads was 89% (SD 4%). Within-group gene expressions was all strongly correlated: *P*-values for statistical significance for all correlated pairs were estimated to lie below 2.2×10^{-16} , whereas squared Pearson's correlation coefficients r^2 ranged from 0.79 to 0.98 (Fig. S3, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A710>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>). Tissues that display highest correlated gene expression were DRG (mean r^2 0.98), followed by SC (0.97) and whole brain (0.96). Less correlated is whole blood (0.84). The CFA pain model showed marginally more robustly correlated gene expression (mean r^2 0.95) than SNI (0.93).

4.8. Replication of publicly available data

Replication of differential expression was attempted using genome-wide data sets, available in the GEO database,¹⁹ as well using a survey of differentially expressed, but pain-centric genes.³⁰ A total of 79 genes were identified through significant fold change in at least 4 different microarray experiments. Of the study's initial list of 79 genes, 65 were matched to HGNC's official gene names. For each gene surveyed, information about expression fold change (FC) direction (up, down) has been compiled in 2 tissues, namely SC and DRG, and for 2 pain models, namely IP and NP. Here, we have been careful to interpret absence of change direction as not necessarily evidence for absence of change, therefore leading to a two-state model of expression fold change per gene. For replication, we first determined in our data the direction of change of expression, up or down, based on the sign of the change and from associated significance *P*-value $P < 0.05$ (the fold change was unassigned if *P*-value is insignificant). For instance, we find the gene cathepsin S, Ctss, upregulated in SNI in DRG (\log_2 FC = +1.2, $P = 5 \times 10^{-5}$). Then, for each gene, we compiled the number of times (up to 4; 2 tissues in 2 pain models) that the survey and our results committed to call a fold change direction in corresponding tissue-pain model pairs. For instance, the gene Ctss has 3 corresponding committed calls: DRG and SC in NP, and SC in IP. We also tracked fold change mismatches, or conflicts, in committed calls. For instance, gene Tac1 (tachykinin

precursor 1) has previously been found to be upregulated in DRG in NP but is found to be downregulated in our work.

4.9. Human and mouse transcriptomes comparison

Human gene expression data from the naive tissues studied in the current data set were downloaded from⁵: <http://xavierlab2.mgh.harvard.edu/EnrichmentProfiler/download.html>. Blood RNA samples from human subjects diagnosed with low-back pain were collected in University of Parma hospital at the first visit and at the 3-month follow-up from the acute episode. The enrolled subjects reported pain for less than 8 weeks and did not have other pain episodes within the last 6 months. The subjects with previous history of cancer or vertebral fracture were excluded. Blood was collected by venipuncture into Tempus Blood tubes (Applied Biosystems, Beverly, MA). Total RNA was extracted using Maxwell 16 LEV simplyRNA Blood Kit (Promega, Madison, WI) and quantified using the NanoDrop 1000 (Thermo Scientific, Waltham, MA). The RNA quality was assessed with the 4200 TapeStation (Agilent Technologies, Santa Clara, CA). Blood transcriptomics data for control subjects were from GEO set GSE90081.⁵³ RNA-Seq data were mapped using STAR aligner,¹⁸ and differential expression of genes was assessed using FeatureCount³⁵ followed by Deseq2.³⁶

4.10. Species-specific gene expression

Identification of species-specific gene expression was performed by counting in each species how many tissues expresses the gene (from $N = 0-4$), then computing the bias $|N_{\text{mouse}} - N_{\text{human}}|$; a bias of 2 or more defines a gene that is species-specific.

4.11. Star plot

In the star plot, the 4 axes were defined: axis 1 identified genes that were exclusively differentially expressed in the CFA pain model (green; $|t_{\text{CFA}}| \geq 2$ and $|t_{\text{SNI}}| \leq 1$); axis 3, genes in SNI only (purple; $|t_{\text{SNI}}| \geq 2$ and $|t_{\text{CFA}}| \leq 1$); axis 2, genes in both CFA and SNI with same $+/+$ or $-/-$ fold change sign (pink; $|t_{\text{CFA}}| \geq 2$ or $|t_{\text{SNI}}| \geq 2$, and $2.0 \geq t_{\text{CFA}}/t_{\text{SNI}} \geq 0.5$); and finally axis 4, genes in both CFA and SNI, but this time with opposite \pm or $-/+$ fold change sign (orange; $|t_{\text{CFA}}| \geq 2$ or $|t_{\text{SNI}}| \geq 2$, and $2.0 \geq -t_{\text{CFA}}/t_{\text{SNI}} \geq 0.5$). Because each axis required statistical significance at the alpha 0.01 level with $|t| \geq 2$,⁷³ identified genes represented a confident set to perform further analyses.

4.12. Gene set enrichment analyses

Gene Ontology's (GO) biological processes pathways have been used for analysis.^{3,22} For each star plot, the most significant pathway was reported for each of the 4 axes. Once a pathway was reported, genes that were members of that pathway were removed from the list of genes and the GSEA was repeated; this reduced the likelihood that pathways with similar or related functions be reported. Because we aimed for biological specificity, we limited analyses to pathways with 1000 genes or less. In GO, pathways are organized in a hierarchical fashion; we discarded pathways that have more than 5 generations of children, again favoring pathways with more defined biological functions. Finally, we required that a selected pathway has no more than 50% overlap in gene composition with all those pathways previously selected, promoting functional diversity, but more importantly, preventing closely related pathways to be overrepresented during the selection process.

4.13. Human genome-wide association studies

We performed GWAS on data from the UK Biobank project (application number 20802).^{2,58} Back pain was selected as a phenotype of choice because it is present in a large proportion of the population (about 8%). To define cases, we used the field 3571, where subjects answered “no” to the question “Have you had back pains for more than 3 months?” while answering “yes” to the “back pain” category in field 6159 where the question was “In the last month have you experienced any of the following that interfered with your usual activities?” (n = 32,209). The limited time extent is in line with the time span between pain intervention in the mice and their sacrifice. Control individuals were those that answered “none of the above” for the question in field 6159 (n = 163,825). First-hand standard genotyping quality control was performed by the UK BioBank consortium, and is fully documented on their web portal (<http://biobank.ctsu.ox.ac.uk/crystal/refer.cgi?id=155580>). Genome-wide association study was performed using genotypic data only, using the 500K cohort version. People were discarded based on: failed genotyping QC (as per UK BioBank–heterozygosity rate, genotyping rate, etc.), genetic vs declared sex mismatch, voluntary retraction, and of non-“white British” ancestry. Among individuals with first- and second-degree relatives, we retained the one individual who displayed the best genotyping rate. Kinship was estimated using KING v2.1.³⁷ We used PLINK version v1.90b4.6 64-bit (August 15, 2017) to perform logistic regression,⁴⁸ using age, sex, genotyping platform, and the first 5 genetic principal components as covariables. Post-GWAS SNP QC featured at least 1% minor allele frequency, genotyping rate better than or equal to 90%, and *P*-value for departure from Hardy–Weinberg equilibrium no less than 10⁻⁶. PLINK was also used to extract linkage disequilibrium information between SNPs and select tag SNPs based on *r*² ≤ 0.5; enrichment of SNPs in genes was evaluated using these tag SNPs. Genes that span several haploblocks will be represented by each block’s tag SNP; this might seem to skew analyses as longer genes will contribute to more SNPs, but usage of tag SNPs guarantee uncoupled GWAS results within long genes as tag SNPs are, by definition, in low LD with one another.

4.14. Genes commonly implicated in pain pathways

The list of genes commonly implicated in pain pathways has been composed from several sources: for human pain genes, we used a combination of Algnomics/Cogenics Pain Research Panel V2³⁸ and Pain Research Forum’s pain gene resource (<https://www.painresearchforum.org/>), and Amigo’s Gene Ontology term GO:0019233, whereas for mouse pain genes, we used the Pain Genes Database.³¹ We also used Ensembl BioMart service to provide for a correspondence between human genes and mouse ones. The pain genes list comprises a total of n = 800 pain genes (Table S12, available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A722>; legend available at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>), with matching human/mouse homologs. All mouse pain genes have human homologs, whereas a few human pain genes have no mouse homologs (n = 21).

4.15. Protein interaction network

We considered data from the STRING database, a repository of interacting proteins.⁵⁹ Only interactions in the human taxon (9606) were considered because they were more numerous than that of the mouse (10090) ones.

4.16. Study approval

All mice experimental procedures were approved by the Animal Care Committee at McGill University under protocol number 7869 and were performed in full agreement with the ethical guidelines of the Canadian Council of Animal Care and the guidelines of the Committee for Research and Ethical Issues of the International Association for the Study of Pain.

The human low-back pain cohort is part of a larger study (PainOmics), approved by the Ethical Committee at the hospital university of Parma, protocol number 43543 version 8, and registered on clinicaltrials.gov (NCT02037763). All patients signed a written informed consent before the enrolment.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

The accession number for the data sets reported in this article is GEO set GSE111216.

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Author contributions: L. Diatchenko, J. S. Mogil, M. Parisien, A. Samoshkin, A. Khoutorsky, M. Allegri, N. El-Hachem, and S. N. Tansley designed the analytical plan and experiments. A. Samoshkin, S. N. Tansley, M. H. Piltonen, and L. J. Martin performed animal experiment, collected, and processed mouse tissues. M. Allegri and C. Dagostino were responsible for human subject collection and samples processing. M. Parisien performed all bioinformatics analyses, except human blood mRNA processed by N. El-Hachem. M. Parisien, A. Samoshkin, A. Khoutorsky, and L. Diatchenko wrote the manuscript. A. Khoutorsky, J. S. Mogil, M. Allegri and L. Diatchenko supervised the project. All the authors read and edited the final manuscript.

Appendix A. Supplemental digital content

Supplemental digital content associated with this article can be found online at <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A710>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A711>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A712>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A713>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A714>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A715>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A716>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A717>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A718>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A719>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A720>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A721>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A722>, <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A723>, and <http://links.lww.com/PAIN/A724>.

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