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2 **Acute inhibition of TAK1 protects against neuronal death in cerebral ischemia**

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9 **Running title:** TAK1 in cerebral ischemia

10

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1 **Abstract:**

2 Neuronal apoptosis contributes to ischemic brain damage and neurodegenerative disorders. Key
3 regulators of neuronal apoptosis are the transcription factor NF- κ B and the MAP kinases p38/MAPK
4 and JNK, which share a common upstream activator, the MAP3 kinase TGF β -activated kinase 1
5 (TAK1). Here, we investigate the function of TAK1 in ischemia-induced neuronal apoptosis. In primary
6 cortical neurons TAK1 was activated by oxygen glucose deprivation (OGD), an *in vitro* model of
7 cerebral ischemia. We found that short-term inhibition of TAK1 protected against OGD *in vitro* and
8 reduced the infarct volume after middle cerebral artery occlusion *in vivo*. Prolonged inhibition or
9 deletion of the TAK1 gene in neurons was, however, not protective. Short-term, but not prolonged
10 inhibition of TAK1 interfered with the activation of p38/MAPK and JNK by OGD, the induction of the
11 pro-oxidative genes cox-2, nox-2, and p40phox, and the formation of superoxide. We found that
12 prolonged TAK1 inhibition upregulated another MAP3 kinase, ASK-1, which is able to compensate for
13 TAK1 inhibition. Our study demonstrates that TAK1 is a central target for short-term inhibition of key
14 signaling pathways and neuroprotection in cerebral ischemia.

15

16 **Keywords:** TAK1 / ischemia / neuroprotection

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1 Introduction

2 Stroke is the most common neurological disease and the second leading cause of death in western
3 countries (1). Presently, treatment options are still not satisfactory (2). To improve this situation the
4 molecular events that lead to tissue demise and neuron loss in cerebral ischemia need to be
5 elucidated. Neurons die of apoptosis in the border zone of an ischemic stroke, the so-called
6 penumbra. In the context of neuronal apoptosis, NF- κ B and the MAP kinases JNK and p38/MAPK are
7 major regulators of gene transcription.

8 NF- κ B is activated in neurodegenerative disorders and in ischemic stroke (3, 4). Although the
9 mechanism of NF- κ B activation in cerebral ischemia is still not completely understood, there is
10 evidence that the upstream kinase IKK is involved (5-7). NF- κ B is well known for its anti-apoptotic
11 action. Surprisingly, however, NF- κ B promotes neuronal apoptosis in cerebral ischemia and
12 neurodegenerative disorders. In line with this concept, deletion of the NF- κ B subunits p50 or p65
13 reduced the infarct size in a mouse model of stroke (3, 8, 9). Furthermore, inhibition or deletion of
14 the upstream kinase IKK protected against acute neurodegeneration in cerebral ischemia (6). In
15 Parkinson's and Huntington's disease, too, a detrimental effect of IKK has been reported (4, 7).

16 In parallel to the NF- κ B pathway, cerebral ischemia activates the MAP kinases JNK and p38/MAPK
17 (10) that signal to the transcription factor AP-1 and other targets. Indeed, ample evidence documents
18 that JNK aggravates ischemic brain damage and neurodegenerative disorders (11, 12). Selective
19 inhibition of p38/MAPK was also shown to reduce the infarct size (13).

20 In view of the important role of NF- κ B, JNK, and p38/MAPK signaling in neuronal apoptosis, it is
21 interesting to note that the NF- κ B and MAP kinase signaling pathways are connected at several
22 levels. Target genes of NF- κ B inhibit JNK signaling (14, 15). Therefore, inhibiting IKK promotes
23 overactivation of AP-1 in cerebral ischemia (16), which may neutralize the efficacy of IKK inhibition.
24 However, there is also a mechanism that activates all three pathways at the same time; it involves
25 the common upstream kinase, TGF β -activated kinase 1 (TAK1). TAK1 is a mitogen-activated protein

1 kinase kinase kinase (MAP3K). In response to IL-1 β , TNF, TGF β , and other stimuli, TAK1 activates the
2 MAP2Ks MKK4/7 and MKK3/6, which activate JNK and p38/MAPK, respectively. In addition, TAK1 is
3 responsible for activating IKK and the canonical NF- κ B signaling pathway. TAK1-deficient mice are
4 embryonically lethal (17, 18). Therefore, a conditional approach has been used to investigate the
5 function of TAK1 in postnatal mice. This strategy showed that TAK1 is a key regulator of innate and
6 adaptive immune responses (18). Furthermore, TAK1 is essential for survival of hematopoietic cells,
7 hepatocytes, and keratinocytes (19, 20). Deletion of TAK1 in liver parenchymal cells caused apoptosis
8 and early onset hepatocarcinogenesis (19, 21).

9 Although TAK1 is highly expressed in the brain (22), little is known about TAK1 function in the central
10 nervous system. It is also unclear whether TAK1 can be activated by ischemia. In this study,
11 therefore, we aimed to characterize the role of TAK1 in neurons during cerebral ischemia. For this
12 purpose we inhibited TAK1 by a small-molecule compound and deleted the kinase by a genetic
13 approach. Our data demonstrate that acute inhibition of TAK1 provides neuroprotection in ischemia,
14 while chronic inhibition is compensated by upregulation of the MAP3K ASK-1 and subsequent
15 activation of JNK and p38/MAPK.

16

17

1 **Results**

2 **Acute inhibition of TAK1 provides neuroprotection in cerebral ischemia**

3 To discover whether cerebral ischemia activates TAK1 in primary cortical neurons, we used a pull-
4 down kinase assay of TAK1 with MKK6 as substrate. Neurons treated with TNF (10 ng/ml) showed a
5 slightly increased TAK1 activity that was blocked by a 1-h preincubation with the specific TAK1
6 inhibitor 5Z-7-oxozeaenol (OZ, 600 nM) (23) (Fig. 1a). After oxygen glucose deprivation (OGD), an *in*
7 *vitro* model of cerebral ischemia, TAK1 was activated (Fig. 1a). To investigate whether TAK1
8 influences neuronal apoptosis, we inhibited the kinase activity of TAK1 with OZ starting 1 h before
9 OGD and investigated apoptosis after a recovery period of 24 h by TUNEL staining. Indeed, we found
10 fewer TUNEL-positive neurons after TAK1 was inhibited than in vehicle- (DMSO) treated cultures (Fig.
11 1b). Since TUNEL-positive cells also showed a condensed nucleus in DAPI staining (Fig. 1b), we used
12 nuclear staining by DAPI to detect apoptosis in subsequent experiments. By quantifying condensed
13 apoptotic nuclei in cultures pretreated with increasing concentrations of OZ, neuroprotection was
14 confirmed, with the maximal effect at a concentration of 600 nM (Fig. 1c). To verify that the TAK1
15 inhibitor reduced apoptosis, we measured oligonucleosome accumulation in the cytoplasm as a sign
16 of DNA fragmentation. Indeed, oligonucleosomes increased after OGD in control cultures, but not in
17 cultures pretreated with OZ (Fig. 1d). Taken together, these results indicate that inhibition of TAK1
18 shortly before OGD protects neurons from apoptosis.

19 To further investigate whether inhibition of TAK1 is also neuroprotective in an *in vivo* model of
20 cerebral ischemia, we subjected mice to middle cerebral artery occlusion (MCAO). We found that
21 intracerebroventricular injection of OZ (4 ng or 14 ng) 20 min before MCAO significantly reduced the
22 infarct volume (Fig. 1e). This protective effect was dose-dependent. To test whether the reduction in
23 infarct size also has an impact on mouse behavior, we performed corner tests (24). Mice that were
24 injected with the solvent DMSO showed an increased rate of right turnings after MCAO. This effect
25 was lost after pretreatment with OZ (4 ng), suggesting that TAK1 inhibition improves the

sensorimotor outcome (Fig. 1f). In keeping with our findings, these results also demonstrate that activation of TAK1 contributes to ischemic brain damage.

Chronic inhibition of TAK1 is not neuroprotective

Acute TAK1 inhibition protected neurons in cerebral ischemia; therefore, we investigated whether genetic deletion of TAK1 had the same effect. As TAK1^{-/-} mice die at E9.5 – E10.5 (17, 18), we employed a conditional approach to delete TAK1 in neurons. For this, we infected neurons from TAK1^{fl/fl} mice (18) with adenoviruses that express either only GFP (Ad-GFP) or the Cre recombinase together with GFP (Ad-Cre-GFP). Four days after infection most neurons expressed GFP. Ten days after infection we performed immunoblotting of cell lysates to determine whether TAK1 was present. After infection with Ad-Cre-GFP, but not with the control virus Ad-GFP, no TAK1 protein was detected (Fig. 2a). We used these cultures 10 d after infection to further investigate whether deletion of TAK1 is neuroprotective in OGD. Unexpectedly, deleting TAK1 did not have any effect on the rate of neuronal apoptosis after OGD (Fig. 2b). To exclude unspecific effects of OZ, we pretreated primary cortical TAK1^{fl/fl} or TAK1^{-/-} neurons with either OZ or the solvent DMSO. In line with previous results, TAK1^{fl/fl} neurons were protected by OZ in OGD. However, OZ did not have any effect on survival of TAK1^{-/-} neurons, demonstrating that the protective effect of OZ depends on the presence of TAK1 (Fig. 2c). To mimic the protracted time course of the genetic TAK1 deletion, we extended the OZ treatment to 10 d. OZ lost its protective action if treatment was prolonged to 10 d (Fig. 2d). Thus, only acute but not chronic inhibition of TAK1 protects primary cortical neurons from OGD-induced apoptosis.

In order to test whether TAK1 deletion *in vivo* is beneficial during MCAO, we crossed TAK1^{fl/fl} mice with mice carrying the allele for the inducible CreER^{T2} recombinase under control of the neuron-specific *CaMKIIα* promoter (TAK1^{nKO}) (25). Because tamoxifen affects ischemic brain damage (26), we postponed MCAO to six weeks after tamoxifen treatment. With this regimen, tamoxifen had no effect on the infarct size (data not shown). Immunoblotting showed significantly less TAK1 in the

cortex of CaMKII α -CreER^{T2}-positive mice but not in the cerebellum, where the CaMKII α gene is not expressed (Fig. 2e). TAK1^{nKO} mice did not show any obvious behavioral phenotype; nor did we observe any spontaneous neuronal cell death or morphological change (data not shown). Interestingly, deletion of TAK1 in neurons of the cortex did not reduce the infarct size (Fig. 2f). Taken together, these results demonstrate that acute, but not chronic inhibition or deletion of TAK1 protects neurons during cerebral ischemia.

TAK1 inhibition has a transient effect on JNK and p38/MAPK activity

TAK1 is a central activator of NF- κ B, JNK, and p38/MAPK signaling. To elucidate the effect of TAK1 inhibition on these downstream signaling pathways, we treated cortical neurons with the solvent DMSO or with OZ for either 10 d (chronic) or 1 h (acute inhibition) before OGD. Whole-cell extracts were prepared at 0 min, 5 min, or 30 min after OGD. OGD activated NF- κ B as shown by a transient degradation of I κ B α (0 min after OGD, Fig. 3a). As expected, NF- κ B activation was prevented if neurons were pretreated for 10 d or for 1 h with OZ (Fig. 3a). Activation of p38/MAPK by OGD persisted for at least 30 min after OGD. Interestingly, p38/MAPK activation by OGD was not affected by pretreatment with OZ for 10 d, whereas only transient p38/MAPK activation was observed in the presence of acute TAK1 inhibition. As shown in Fig. 3b, phosphorylation of p38/MAPK was markedly reduced 30 min after OGD by 1-h OZ treatment. OGD also activated JNK signaling as demonstrated by the increased phosphorylation of the substrate c-Jun (Fig. 3c). In neurons pretreated chronically with OZ, c-Jun was phosphorylated for at least 30 min after OGD, whereas no activation was seen in neurons pretreated acutely with OZ (Fig. 3c). These data show that both acute and chronic inhibition of TAK1 block NF- κ B activation but their effects on JNK and p38/MAPK signaling differ. Thus, blocking JNK and/or p38/MAPK might be responsible for the protective effect of acute TAK1 inhibition.

In support of this view SB203580, a specific inhibitor of p38/MAPK, and D-JNKI, a JNK inhibitor, blocked cell death induced by OGD (Fig. 3d). Interestingly, the protective effect of both compounds was preserved if cells were pretreated with OZ for 10 d (Fig. 3d) demonstrating that after

1 prolonged TAK1 inhibition p38/MAPK and JNK are still involved in cell death but are activated
2 independent from TAK1.

3 To test whether TAK1 inhibition would also interfere with activity of the MAP kinases p38/MAPK
4 and JNK *in vivo* we treated mice with OZ (14 ng icv) 20 min before MCAO and evaluated the
5 phosphorylation of p38/MAPK and c-Jun 60 min after MCAO in cortical lysates. TAK1 inhibition
6 significantly reduced the activity of p38/MAPK after MCAO but had no effect on c-Jun
7 phosphorylation (Fig. 3e). A similar finding was obtained 180 min after MCAO (data not shown).
8 These data confirm *in vivo* that TAK1 mediates the activation of p38/MAPK by cerebral ischemia.
9 The reason for the discrepancy between *in vivo* and *in vitro* data on the activation of JNK is unclear
10 but could lie in the fact that neuronal activation of JNK by TAK1 is concealed by effects in other cell
11 types of the tissue extracts.

12

1 **Acute TAK1 inhibition reverses the induction of *Cox-2*, *Nox-2*, and *p40^{phox}* by OGD**

2 Activation of p38/MAPK and c-Jun was impaired after OGD in neurons pretreated acutely, but not
 3 chronically with OZ. Next, we examined the expression of the target genes *Cox-2* (***Ptgs2***), *Nox-2*, and
 4 *p40^{phox}* (27-29). In keeping with our results, we found that *Cox-2*, *Nox-2*, and *p40^{phox}* were induced 3 h
 5 after OGD, but induction was impaired in neurons after acute inhibition of TAK1 (Fig. 4a-c). However,
 6 chronic inhibition of TAK1 did not interfere with the upregulation of *Cox-2* and *Nox-2* and only
 7 partially reduced the induction of *p40^{phox}* by OGD in neurons (Fig. 4d-f). Since the *Nox-2* and the
 8 *p40^{phox}* genes encode for subunits of the NADPH oxidase, an enzyme that is responsible for
 9 superoxide formation, and COX-2 produces superoxide, too, we examined the level of superoxide
 10 production in neurons after OGD by incubating cortical neurons with dihydroethidine (DHE). By
 11 quantifying DHE-positive nuclei we found that acute, but not chronic inhibition of TAK1 decreased
 12 the formation of superoxide anions after OGD (Fig. 5a). Next, we measured levels of reduced
 13 glutathione (GSH), a superoxide scavenger and anti-apoptotic factor in the brain (30). GSH levels
 14 were reduced after OGD, but less so if neurons were pretreated for 1 h with OZ. In contrast, no
 15 difference in GSH levels was found in ischemic neurons after chronic inhibition of TAK1 (Fig. 5b).
 16 These results suggest that the reduced formation of superoxide anions in neurons after acute
 17 inhibition of TAK1 mediates neuroprotection.

18 **Upregulation of ASK-1 compensates for chronic TAK1 inhibition**

19 To investigate the discrepancy that acute, but not chronic inhibition of TAK1 provides
 20 neuroprotection in ischemia, we sought to determine whether other MAP3 kinases might
 21 compensate for TAK1 activation and mediate selective induction of JNK and/or p38/MAPK, but not
 22 NF- κ B after OGD. Therefore, we performed RT-PCR on total RNA from neuronal cultures incubated
 23 for either 10 d or 1 h with OZ. We found that apoptosis signal-regulating kinase 1 (*Ask-1*) was
 24 significantly induced in neurons with chronic, but not acute inhibition of TAK1 (Fig. 6a, b). However,
 25 we could not detect any changes in the expression of the following MAP3 kinases: *Mlk2*, *Mlk3*,

1 *Mekk1*, *Mekk3*, *Mekk4*, *Dlk*, or *Tao2* (Fig. 6a-c, data not shown). To determine whether induction of
2 *Ask-1* underlies the lack of efficacy of chronic TAK1 inhibition we blocked ASK-1 activity by viral
3 expression of a dominant negative form of ASK-1, ASK-1-KM (31). As reported previously inhibition
4 of ASK-1 reduced neuronal cell death in response to OGD (Fig. 6d) (32). Importantly, when ASK-1
5 was inhibited prolonged OZ treatment further improved cell survival after OGD. This is in
6 accordance with the notion that upregulation of ASK-1 underlies the lack of efficacy of chronic
7 TAK1 inhibition. In line with the known pro-apoptotic function of ASK-1 (33), we found that chronic
8 inhibition of TAK1 by OZ induced a significant increase in apoptotic nuclei (Fig. 6e). This effect was
9 confounded in other experiments (Fig. 2c) by a higher rate of apoptosis that was due to additional
10 medium changes to control for OGD.

11 In summary, we propose that acute TAK1 inhibition exerts its neuroprotective effect in OGD by
12 blocking JNK and p38/MAPK activation and thereby interfering with the upregulation of pro-oxidative
13 genes such as *Nox-2*, *p40^{phox}*, and *Cox-2* and the subsequent increase in superoxide formation.
14 Chronic inhibition or deletion, in contrast, is compensated by upregulation of ASK-1 that activates
15 JNK and p38/MAPK (Fig. 7).

16

1 Discussion

2 The data presented in this study demonstrate that ischemia activates the MAP3K TAK1 in neurons. In
 3 line with current knowledge that TAK1 is an upstream activator of several signaling pathways,
 4 including JNK, p38/MAPK, and NF- κ B, we found that activation of these pathways in neurons by OGD
 5 is mediated by TAK1. Accordingly, the induction of *Nox-2* (*gp91^{phox}*), *p40^{phox}*, and *Cox-2*, target genes
 6 of AP-1 and NF- κ B (27-29), depends on TAK1 activity. Upregulation of COX-2 and the NADPH oxidase
 7 with its key subunits NOX-2 and *p40^{phox}* are considered to be important sources of superoxide anions
 8 in cerebral ischemia (34-36). This might be the mechanism by which TAK1 promotes oxidative stress
 9 in ischemic neurons. Consistent with the central role of superoxide anions in cerebral ischemia, both
 10 NOX-2- and COX-2-deficient mice are protected against cerebral ischemia (37, 38). Thus, blocking the
 11 induction of *Nox-2*, *p40^{phox}*, and *Cox-2* as well as superoxide production may explain how acute
 12 inhibition of TAK1 protects against cerebral ischemia both *in vitro* and *in vivo*.

13 In our experiments TAK1 inhibition involves the small-molecule inhibitor OZ. This compound inhibits
 14 TAK1 but not other MAP3Ks (23). The specificity of OZ is confirmed by the finding that OZ lost its
 15 efficacy in TAK1^{-/-} neurons. Therefore, it came as a surprise that genetic deletion of TAK1 did not
 16 confer protection against cerebral ischemia. Likewise, long-term treatment with OZ to mimic the
 17 protracted time course of genetic deletion had no effect on neuronal survival after ischemia. The
 18 transience of OZ effects suggests that other mechanisms compensate for long-term inhibition or
 19 deficiency of TAK1. Indeed, after prolonged TAK1 inhibition we found an upregulation of the MAP3K
 20 *Ask-1*. **How TAK1 inhibition stimulates *Ask-1* expression is unclear so far. A possible explanation**
 21 **involves E2F, the major transcriptional regulator of *Ask-1* (33). As E2F is blocked by NF- κ B signaling**
 22 **(39), inhibition of TAK1 and subsequently of NF- κ B may release E2F to stimulate *Ask-1* expression.**

23 A dominant negative mutant of ASK-1 restored the neuroprotective effect of prolonged TAK1
 24 inhibition demonstrating that ASK-1 mediates the compensatory mechanism that leads to inefficacy
 25 of prolonged TAK1 inhibition. Upregulation of ASK-1 is known to induce apoptosis (33) and this may
 26 be why we observed a slightly enhanced baseline rate of apoptosis during prolonged TAK1 inhibition

1 *in vitro* (Fig. 6e). **However, in TAK1^{nKO} mice there was no evidence of neuronal apoptosis or**
2 **neuronal cell loss in cortex and hippocampus (data not shown) suggesting that prolonged TAK1**
3 **inhibition is unlikely to lead to neurotoxic effects *in vivo*.**

4 ASK-1 activates p38/MAPK and JNK but not NF-κB signaling (33), explaining why NF-κB inhibition
5 persisted, but the blockade of p38/MAPK and JNK was only transient after OZ treatment (Fig. 3).
6 After OGD the effects of TAK1 inhibition on neuronal cell death paralleled its effects on p38/MAPK
7 and JNK signaling, suggesting that inhibition of these two pathways is responsible for the neurotoxic
8 effect of TAK1 activation *in vitro*. **However, whether neuronal JNK is really activated by TAK1 during**
9 **cerebral ischemia *in vivo* is questionable (Fig. 3e) and has to be investigated in future studies.** The
10 inhibition of NF-κB signaling that persisted with prolonged TAK1 inhibition was not able to protect
11 neurons against ischemia, in contrast to the protection afforded by a selective NF-κB inhibition (6).
12 This discrepancy may be related to a lower apoptotic threshold due to increased ASK-1 levels after
13 prolonged TAK1 inhibition. Similar to our data, TAK1 deficiency in the liver was shown to activate the
14 MAP3 kinase TAO2 (21). Thus, MAP3 kinases seem to form a plastic signaling network that readily
15 adjusts to inhibition of an individual kinase. These adaptive processes will clearly affect the
16 interpretation of genetic knockout studies.

17 Our data suggest that long-term TAK1 inhibition may not be protective in neurodegenerative
18 disorders. Moreover, TAK1 deficiency caused apoptosis in keratinocytes, hepatocytes, and
19 hematopoietic cells, raising serious safety concerns with respect to chronic TAK1 inhibition (19, 21,
20 40). However, the situation is different for treating acute stroke. A single dose of a specific TAK1
21 inhibitor was neuroprotective by blocking a key step in inflammatory pathways of ischemic brain
22 damage. The short-term administration of a TAK1 inhibitor required for treatment of acute stroke is
23 unlikely to cause toxicity of other organs.

24

1 **Material and Methods**

2 *Materials*

3 5Z-7-oxozeaenol (OZ; **MW, 362.4 g/mol**) was kindly provided by Dr. K. Takehana, Ajinomoto Co.,
4 Kawasaki, Japan, and was purchased from AnalytiCon Discovery GmbH, Potsdam, Germany.

5 Anti-rabbit polyclonal antibody was purchased from Santa Cruz Biotechnology (Santa Cruz, CA).

6 Rabbit antibodies against phosphorylated and nonphosphorylated forms of p38/MAPK and c-Jun
7 were purchased from Cell Signaling Technology (Beverly, MA). Antibody against total TAK1 was
8 purchased from Upstate (Charlottesville, USA). To generate an anti-TAK1 antibody that recognizes
9 exon 2 we immunized rabbits with the following peptide: RAKDVAIKQIESESERK. The antibody was
10 purified by affinity chromatography. Ad-Cre-GFP was purchased from Vector Biolabs (Philadelphia,
11 PA); Ad-ASK-1-KM was purchased from Seven Hills Bioreagents (Cincinnati, OH); Ad-GFP was kindly
12 provided by Dr. D. Nettelbeck, Heidelberg, Germany.

13

14 *Cell culture and virus infection*

15 NMRI mice were used to generate wild-type cultures and TAK1^{fl/fl} mice for TAK1^{-/-} cultures. Primary
16 cortical neurons were prepared from mouse embryos at embryonic day 16 (E16) as described
17 previously (9). In brief, cerebral cortices were dissected and freed from the meninges, hippocampus,
18 and olfactory bulb and incubated in pre-warmed Trypsin-EDTA for 8 min at 37°C. After washing with
19 prewarmed PBS, cell clusters were resuspended in 3 ml of full neurobasal medium (supplemented
20 with 2% B27, 0.5 mM L-glutamine, 100 IU/ml penicillin, and 100 µg/ml streptomycin) and separated
21 into single cells by triturating through a fire-polished Pasteur pipette. Then, 25 x 10⁴ or 10⁶ cells were
22 plated per well of a 24- or 6-well plate, coated with poly-D-Lysine. The cells were incubated at 37°C
23 with 5% CO₂. The next day, half volume of medium was exchanged by neurobasal medium
24 supplemented with 5% FCS. Then half volume of medium was exchanged each third day by full
25 neurobasal medium. Experiments were performed on day *in vitro* (DIV) 10. We previously found that
26 this procedure produces cultures in which > 95% of cells are positive for the neuronal marker NeuN

(9). For adenoviral transduction of neurons, 3 MOI of Ad-Cre-GFP or Ad-GFP were added to 10^6 cells on DIV 1 and incubated for two days. Then, medium was exchanged every two day. For transduction with Ad-ASK-1-KM or Ad-GFP control virus, neurons were infected with 3 MOI on DIV 8.

Oxygen Glucose Deprivation (OGD)

OGD was employed as an *in vitro* model of ischemia. Primary cortical neurons were used on DIV 10. Medium was exchanged with full neurobasal medium containing 5Z-7-oxozeaenol or DMSO. After 1 h half volume of medium was exchanged with neurobasal medium containing 2-deoxy-D-glucose (5 mM end-concentration) and incubated for 1 h. Cells were transferred to an anaerobic chamber that was flushed with CO₂/N₂ (5%/95%) for 15 min. The chamber was tightly sealed and cells were incubated at 37°C for 4.5 h. Subsequently, medium was replaced by fresh medium.

Detection and quantification of apoptosis

Primary cortical neurons on coverslips were stained after OGD using terminal deoxynucleotidyl transferase-mediated dUTP- biotin nick end labeling (TUNEL) (In Situ Cell Death Detection Kit, Roche Applied Science). After OGD, cells were fixed with 4% PFA for 20 min and permeabilized for 5 min at 4°C in PBS containing 0.1% triton X-100. Then, cells were incubated with TUNEL-reaction mix for 1 h at room temperature in the dark and stained with 4',6-diamidin-2-phenylindol (DAPI, Roth, Karlsruhe, Germany) for 5 min. We counted neurons with TUNEL staining or with condensed chromatin in 5 randomly selected fields and expressed the number of apoptotic neurons relative to the total cell count.

Cell-death ELISA^{PLUS} (Roche Applied Science) was performed according to the manufacturer's protocol.

Middle Cerebral Artery Occlusion (MCAO)

Mice were anesthetized by intraperitoneal injection of 150 µl 2.0% tribromoethanol per 10 g body weight. A skin incision was made between the ear and the orbit on the left side. The temporal muscle

1 was removed by electrical coagulation. The stem of the MCA was exposed through a burr hole and
 2 occluded by microbipolar coagulation (Erbe, Tübingen, Germany). Surgery was performed under a
 3 microscope (Hund, Wetzlar, Germany). Twenty min before MCAO we injected vehicle (DMSO) or OZ
 4 solution (both 2 µl) into the lateral ventricle, using a 10-µl Hamilton syringe (6). During the whole
 5 procedure, a body temperature of 37°C was maintained in the mice by using a heating pad. After 48
 6 h, mice were deeply anesthetized with tribromoethanol and perfused intracardially with Ringer's
 7 solution. Brains were quickly removed and frozen on dry ice. Coronal cryosections of the brains (20
 8 µm in thickness) were cut every 400 µm (20-22 sections per brain) and stained with a silver
 9 technique (9). The size of the ischemic lesion was determined using Scion Image software (Scion
 10 Corporation, Frederick, MD) and corrected for brain edema. To evaluate sensorimotor function we
 11 performed corner tests as described previously (24). Mice were randomly assigned to treatment
 12 groups and the investigator was unaware of the treatment or genotype.

13

14 *Real-time PCR*

15 Primary cortical neurons on 6-well plates were lysed and RNA was isolated using RNeasy Mini Kit
 16 (Qiagen) according to the manufacturer's protocol. RNA (2 µg) was transcribed with Moloney murine
 17 leukemia virus reverse transcriptase and random hexamer primers. For real-time PCR the following
 18 primers were used: Cyclophilin A fwd, 5'-AGGTCCTGGCATCTTGTCCAT-3'; Cyclophilin A rev, 5'-
 19 GAACCGTTTGTGTTTGGTCCA-3'; COX-2 fwd, 5'-TGAGCAACTATTCCAAACCAGC-3'; COX-2 rev, 5'-
 20 GCACGTAGTCTTCGATCACTATC-3'; p40^{phox} fwd, 5'-GTCATCGAGGTCAAAACAAAAGG-3'; p40^{phox} rev, 5'-
 21 GCCCATGTAGACTTTGGCTG-3'; NOX-2 fwd, 5'-GGTTTATGATGATGGGCCTAA-3'; NOX-2 rev, 5'-
 22 GCACTGGAACCCCTGAGAAA-3'; ASK-1 fwd, 5'-ACTCCAGTCCCTGAAGGAAAT-3'; ASK-1 rev, 5'-
 23 CAGTAGACCTTGTTGTGTGGTG-3'; MEKK3 fwd, 5'-ATAAGGACACAGGTCACCCAA-3'; MEKK3 rev, 5'-
 24 TGCTCCACATCTTCGTATCTCA-3'. Real-time PCR was performed according to the following protocol:
 25 10 min at 95°C, 15 s at 95°C, and 1 min at 60°C (40 cycles). Amplification was quantified using
 26 Absolute Blue qPCR SYBR Green Mix (Thermo Scientific, Waltham, MA, USA). Quantified results for

individual cDNAs were normalized to cyclophilin A using the $\Delta\Delta C_t$ method. The purity of the amplified products was checked by the dissociation curve.

TAK1 Kinase Assay

Cell lysates were prepared using 100 μ l lysis buffer (50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.4, 150 mM NaCl, 1% NP-40, 0.25% sodium deoxycholate, 1 mM EDTA, 2 μ M leupeptin, and 1 μ M PMSF) per well. Soluble parts were separated and diluted with PBS to 1 ml. Then, lysates were cleared by incubation with 100 μ l of protein-G-sepharose beads at 4°C for 15 min. Protein concentration was determined by Bradford assay, using Roti®-Quant (Roth, Karlsruhe, Germany). Next, 500 μ g of protein lysates was incubated with 1 μ l of anti-TAK1-antibody for 2 h at 4°C under gentle rocking. Immunocomplexes were captured with 100 μ l protein-G-sepharose and 2 μ g of anti-rabbit-IgG at 4°C. Immunocomplexes were washed 3 times in PBS and 20 μ l of this suspension was used for kinase reaction.

The cDNA coding for human MKK6 was cloned into the pGEX-4T vector (Amersham Pharmacia Biotech, Freiburg, Germany) to produce glutathione S-transferase (GST) fusion proteins. Recombinant protein was purified using Glutathione Sepharose™ 4B (Amersham Pharmacia Biotech, Freiburg, Germany). For the kinase reaction, 20 μ l of the isolated immunocomplexes was mixed with 1 μ g purified MKK6-GST protein, 1 μ Ci γ^{32} P-ATP, 20 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.5, 2 mM EGTA, and 10 mM $MgCl_2$ and incubated at 30°C for 10 min. Reaction was stopped by heating to 95°C for 5 min. Finally, samples were separated by SDS-PAGE analysis. Due to a partial degradation MKK6 formed a double band in some experiments.

Immunoblotting

Neurons were pretreated for either 10 d or 1 h with the TAK1 inhibitor 5Z-7-oxozeaenol (600 nM) or DMSO. Then, 10^6 neurons were lysed at different time points after OGD. Neuronal lysates were resolved by 6% to 12% SDS-polyacrylamide gel electrophoresis. TAK1 was detected using rabbit anti-TAK1 or the exon 2-specific antibody. Phospho-c-Jun, c-Jun, phospho-p38/MAPK, and p38/MAPK were detected with rabbit anti-phospho-c-Jun and anti-c-Jun, anti-phospho-p38/MAPK (Thr 180/Tyr

182), and anti-p38/MAPK antibodies (Cell Signaling, Danvers, MA). I κ B α was detected using goat anti-I κ B α (Santa Cruz Biotechnology, Santa Cruz, USA). **After detection of phosphorylated proteins membranes were stripped (100 mM NaOH, 10 min) and reprobed with antibodies against non-phosphorylated proteins.** For immunoblotting the ischemic region of the cortex was dissected and lysed in RIPA buffer (150 mM NaCl, 50 mM Tris-HCl, pH 7.4, 10 mM EDTA, 0.1% SDS, 1% triton X-100, 0.5% sodium deoxycholate, 0.5 mM PMSF) supplemented with phosphatase inhibitor cocktails 1+2 (Sigma) and protease inhibitor tablets (Roche).

Quantification of superoxide anions by DHE and GSH-Glo Assay

Immediately after OGD, dihydroethidium (DHE, Molecular Probes) (5 μ M) was added to neuronal cultures in neurobasal medium without phenol red and incubated for 30 min at 37°C. Then, cells were washed, fixed, and stained for DAPI. For evaluation the percentage of nuclei stained red was quantified using ImageJ software.

The amount of glutathione in the cytoplasm of primary cortical neurons was analyzed using GSH-Glo™ Glutathione Assay (Promega) according to the manufacturer's instructions. Briefly, primary cortical neurons were lysed 30 min after OGD in 100 μ l PBS per well. Then, 10 μ l of lysate was mixed with 100 μ l GSH-Glo reagent in a white-walled 96-well plate. The mixture was incubated for 30 min, and then 100 μ l of Luciferin Detection Reagent was added to each well, mixed, and incubated for 15 min. Samples were measured with a luminometer.

Statistical analyses

Data are expressed as mean \pm SEM. Student's t test was used to compare 2 groups and one-way ANOVA followed by Newman-Keuls post-hoc test to compare more than 2 groups.

Conflict of interest

1 The authors declare no conflict of interest.

2

3

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6

1 Titles and legends to figures

2 **Figure 1 Acute inhibition of TAK1 during oxygen glucose deprivation (OGD) and middle** 3 **cerebral artery occlusion (MCAO) is neuroprotective.**

4 (a) TAK1 activity was monitored by a pull-down kinase assay. Primary cortical neurons were either
5 stimulated with TNF (10 ng/ml), preincubated with 5Z-7-oxozeaenol (600 nM, OZ), or subjected to
6 4.5-h OGD and the indicated recovery times. Equal precipitation of TAK1 was verified by
7 immunoblotting of the same membrane. A typical example of four independent experiments is
8 shown. C, control.

9 (b) TUNEL and DAPI staining of primary cortical neurons after 4.5-h OGD and a 24-h recovery period.
10 Scale bar: 20 μ m.

11 (c) Quantification of apoptotic nuclei in neurons after 4.5-h OGD and a 24-h recovery period.
12 Neurons were treated with the indicated concentrations of OZ for 1 h before OGD. Nuclei were
13 stained by DAPI. Values are means \pm SEM, N=3. One-way ANOVA: $F(7/16)=324.5$, $P<0.0001$.
14 *** $P<0.0001$ (Newman-Keuls post hoc test). ns, not significant.

15 (d) Quantification of the amount of oligonucleosomes in the cytoplasm of neurons as a sign of DNA
16 fragmentation after 4.5-h OGD and a 24-h recovery. Values are means \pm SEM, N=10. One-way
17 ANOVA: $F(3/39)=15.03$, $P<0.0001$, *** $P<0.001$ (Newman-Keuls post hoc test).

18 (e) and (f) Mice were subjected to MCAO after intracerebroventricular injections of OZ.

19 (e) upper panel, silver-stained brain sections with labeled infarct area 48 h after MCAO; lower panel,
20 evaluation of infarct volume 48 h after MCAO. Values are means \pm SEM, N=5-6, One-way ANOVA:
21 $F(2/22)=9.071$, $P=0.0016$, * $P<0.01$, ** $P<0.001$ (Newman-Keuls post hoc test).

22 (f) Mice were tested for sensorimotor function by corner tests before and 24 h after MCAO. Ten
23 turnings were evaluated per mouse. Values are means \pm SEM, N=5-6. * $P=0.0027$ (Students-t-test).

1 **Figure 2** **Acute, but not chronic inhibition or deletion of TAK1 is neuroprotective in ischemia.**

2 (a) Immunoblotting of TAK1 in primary cortical neurons 9 d after infection of TAK1^{fl/fl} neurons with

3 Ad-GFP or Ad-Cre-GFP. The control group was not infected. Tubulin was used to control protein

4 loading in each lane.

5 (b) and (c) Quantification of apoptotic nuclei of TAK1^{fl/fl} and TAK1^{-/-} primary cortical neurons after 4.5-

6 h OGD and 24-h recovery. (b) Values are means \pm SEM, N=4, One-way ANOVA: F(3/15)=11.87,

7 P=0.0007, ***P<0.0001 (Newman-Keuls post hoc test).

8 (c) The protective effect of OZ depends on TAK1. Neurons were pretreated for 1 h with either 600

9 nM OZ or DMSO. Values are means \pm SEM, N=3, One-way ANOVA: F(7/41)=22.74, P<0.0001,

10 **P<0.001 (Newman-Keuls post hoc test).

11 (d) Quantification of the amount of oligonucleosomes in the cytoplasm of neurons after 10 d of

12 pretreatment with 600 nM OZ or DMSO, 4.5-h OGD, and 24-h recovery. Values are means \pm SEM,

13 N=10, One-way ANOVA: F(3/39)=11.64, P<0.0001, ***P<0.0001, **P<0.001 (Newman-Keuls post hoc

14 test).

15 (e) Evaluation of TAK1 in protein lysates from cortex and cerebellum of CaMKII α -CreER^{T2}-positive

16 (TAK1^{nKO}) or -negative (TAK1^{fl/fl}) mice by immunoblotting. Tubulin was used to control loading of

17 protein in each lane.

18 (f) Evaluation of infarct volume of TAK1^{nKO} and control mice. Values are means \pm SEM, N=16-17. ns,

19 not significant.

20

21

Figure 3 Transient effect of TAK1 inhibition on p38/MAPK and JNK but not on NF- κ B signaling *in vitro*

(a) – (c) After incubation for 10 d or 1 h with OZ (600 nM) or DMSO, neurons were exposed to OGD followed by increasing recovery times. Controls received no OGD (\emptyset). Protein lysates were analyzed by immunoblotting to determine the degradation of I κ B α , a marker of NF- κ B activation, and the phosphorylation of p38/MAPK and c-Jun. Values are means \pm SEM of 4 independent experiments.

***P<0.0001, *P<0.01 (Newman-Keuls post hoc test).

(d) Quantification of apoptotic nuclei after 4.5-h OGD and 24-h recovery. OZ (600 nM) was added 10 d before OGD, the p38 inhibitor SB203580 (15 μ M) and the JNK inhibitor D-JNKI (10 μ M) 1 h before OGD as indicated. One-way ANOVA: F(11/35)=644.0, P<0.0001, *P<0.0001 (Newman-Keuls post hoc test).**

(e) Immunoblotting of (phospho)-p38/MAPK and (phospho)-c-Jun in lysates of the ischemic cortex 60 min after mice were treated with OZ (14 ng, icv) or DMSO and subjected to MCAO. Lower panel, quantification of 5-6 independent experiments. Values are means \pm SEM. *P<0.05 (Students-t-test).

Figure 4 Acute TAK1 inhibition reduces expression of *Cox-2*, *Nox-2*, and *p40^{phox}* after OGD

(a) - (f) mRNA of *Cox-2*, *Nox-2*, and *p40^{phox}* was quantified by RT-PCR in cortical neurons 3 h after 4.5-h OGD.

(a) - (c) Neurons were pretreated for 1 h with OZ (600 nM) or DMSO; values are means \pm SEM, N=2-3, *Cox-2*: One-way ANOVA: F(5/13)=5.642, P=0.0016, *P<0.01 (Newman-Keuls post hoc test), *Nox-2*: One-way ANOVA: F(3/9)=14.19, P=0.0039, **P<0.001 (Newman-Keuls post hoc test), *p40^{phox}*: One-way ANOVA: F(5/13)=5.564, P=0.017, *P<0.01 (Newman-Keuls post hoc test). ns, not significant.

(d) - (f) Neurons were pretreated for 10 d with OZ (600 nM) or DMSO; values are means \pm SEM, N=2-3, *Cox-2*: One-way ANOVA: F(3/9)=56.5, P<0.0001, ***P<0.0001 (Newman-Keuls post hoc test), *Nox-2*:

1 2: One-way ANOVA: $F(3/9)=67.55$, $P<0.0001$, *** $P<0.0001$ (Newman-Keuls post hoc test), $p40^{phox}$:
 2 One-way ANOVA: $F(3/9)=18.33$, $P=0.002$, ** $P<0.001$, * $P<0.01$ (Newman-Keuls post hoc test).

3

4 **Figure 5 Acute TAK1 inhibition reduces superoxide formation and increases reduced**
 5 **glutathione after OGD**

6 (a) Neurons were incubated with dihydroethidium (5 μ M, DHE) for 30 min after 4.5-h OGD.
 7 Production of superoxide anions was analyzed by quantifying DHE-positive nuclei. False color images
 8 were generated according to fluorescence intensity using ImageJ software, Scale bar: 20 μ m (upper
 9 panel). Values are means \pm SEM, N=6, One-way ANOVA: $F(7/15)=310.8$, $P<0.0001$, *** $P<0.0001$
 10 (Newman-Keuls post hoc test).

11 (b) Levels of reduced glutathione (GSH) were quantified 30 min after 4.5-h OGD. Neurons were
 12 treated with OZ (600 nm) for 10 d or 1 h. Values are means \pm SEM, N=3, One-way ANOVA:
 13 $F(7/23)=24.34$, $P<0.0001$, *** $P<0.0001$, * $P<0.01$ (Newman-Keuls post hoc test).

14

15 **Figure 6 Upregulation of ASK-1 compensates for TAK1 activity upon long-term inhibition**

16 (a) RT-PCR demonstrated upregulation of *Ask-1* but not *Mekk3* after prolonged TAK1 inhibition.
 17 (b, c) Quantification of mRNA expression of *Ask-1* and *Mekk3* by RT-PCR. *Ask-1*: Values are means \pm
 18 SEM, N=6, One-way ANOVA: $F(3/22)=6.694$, $P=0.0029$, ** $P<0.001$ (Newman-Keuls post hoc test).
 19 *Mekk3*: Values are means \pm SEM, N=4, One-way ANOVA: $F(3/15)=0.5238$, $P=0.6741$.
 20 (d) **Quantification of apoptotic nuclei after viral expression of the dominant negative ASK-1**
 21 **inhibitor ASK-1-KM, treatment with OZ (600 nM) for 10 d, and exposure to 4.5-h OGD and 24-h**
 22 **recovery as indicated. Primary cortical neurons were infected on DIV 8 and exposed to OGD on DIV**
 23 **10. Values are means \pm SEM, N=4, One-way ANOVA: $F(7/31)=177.2$, $P<0.0001$. *** $P<0.0001$**
 24 **(Newman-Keuls post hoc test). ns, not significant.**

1 (e) Quantification of apoptotic nuclei after inhibition of TAK1 by OZ (600 nM) for 10 d *in vitro*. In this
2 experiment there was no additional medium change. Values are means \pm SEM, N=3, *P=0.0152
3 (Student's t-test).

4

5 **Figure 7 Proposed mechanism by which short-term TAK1 inhibition protects neurons against**
6 **ischemia**

7 Acute TAK1 inhibition by OZ blocks activation of JNK, p38/MAPK, and NF- κ B and thereby provides
8 neuroprotection. Chronic TAK1 inhibition induces expression of ASK-1 that compensates for TAK1
9 inhibition with respect to JNK and p38/MAPK activation, transcription of *Cox-2*, *p40^{phox}*, and *Nox-2*
10 and formation of reactive oxygen species, paving the way to cell death.

11

12

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Figure 1

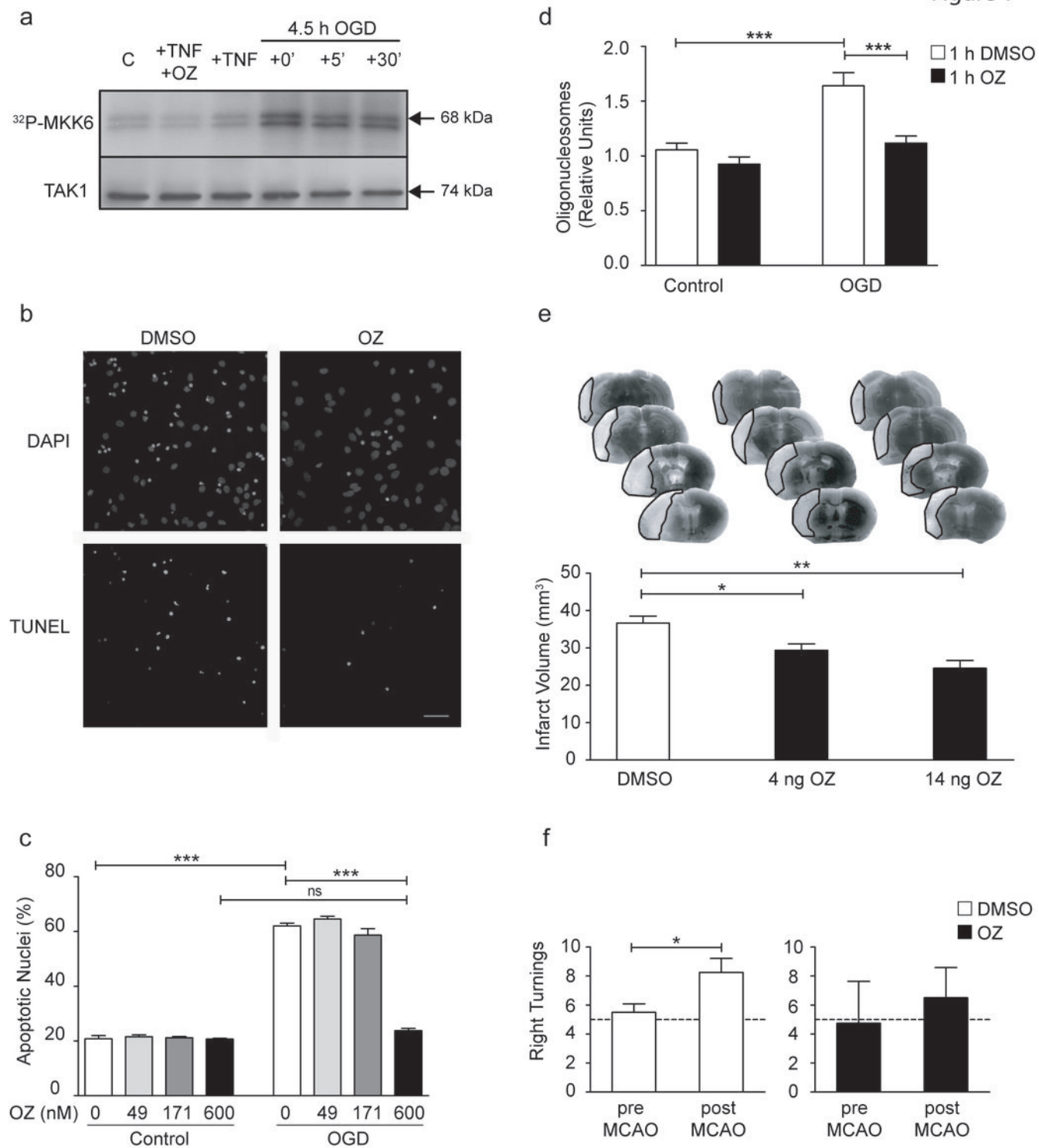


Figure 2

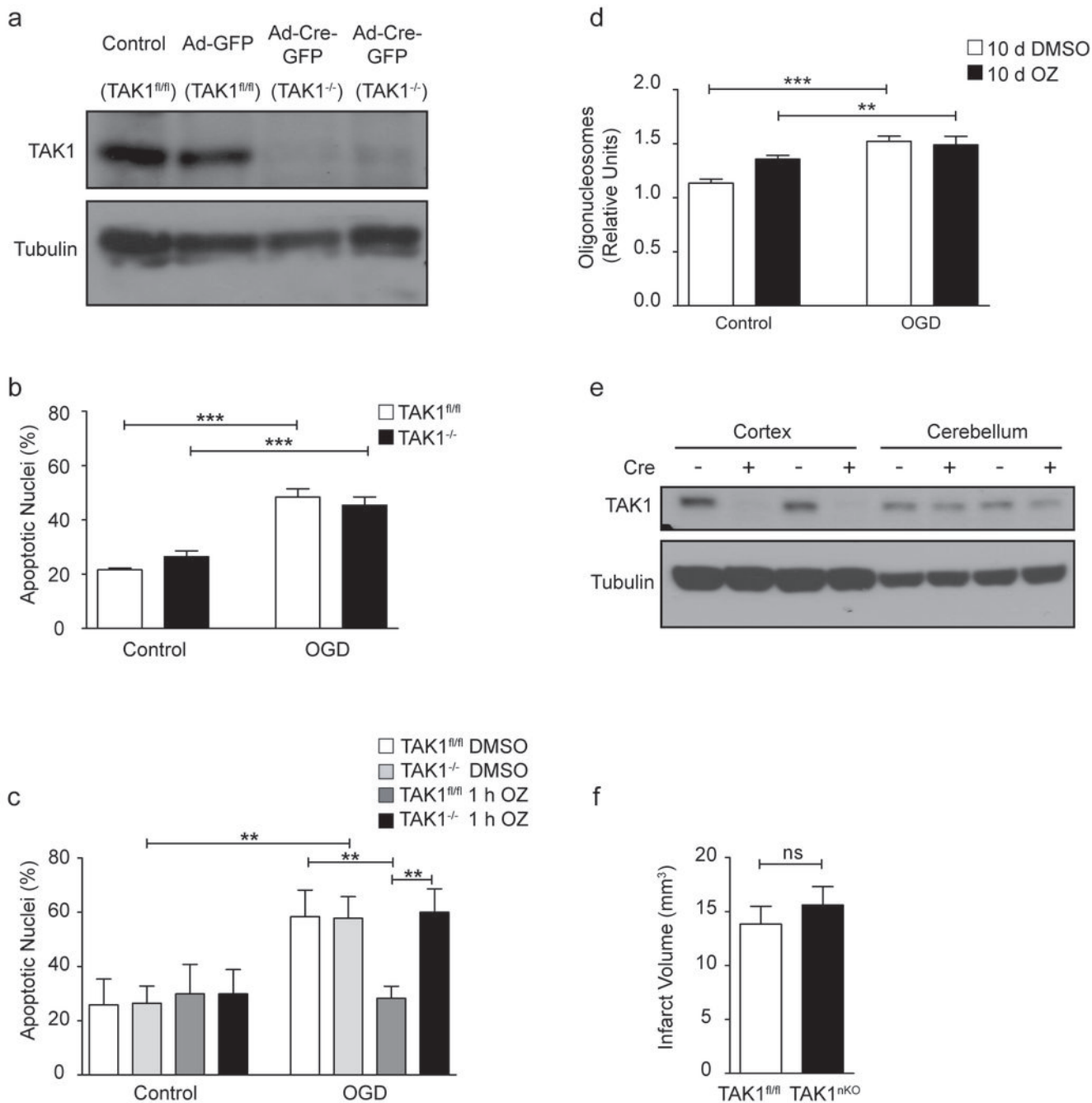


Figure 3

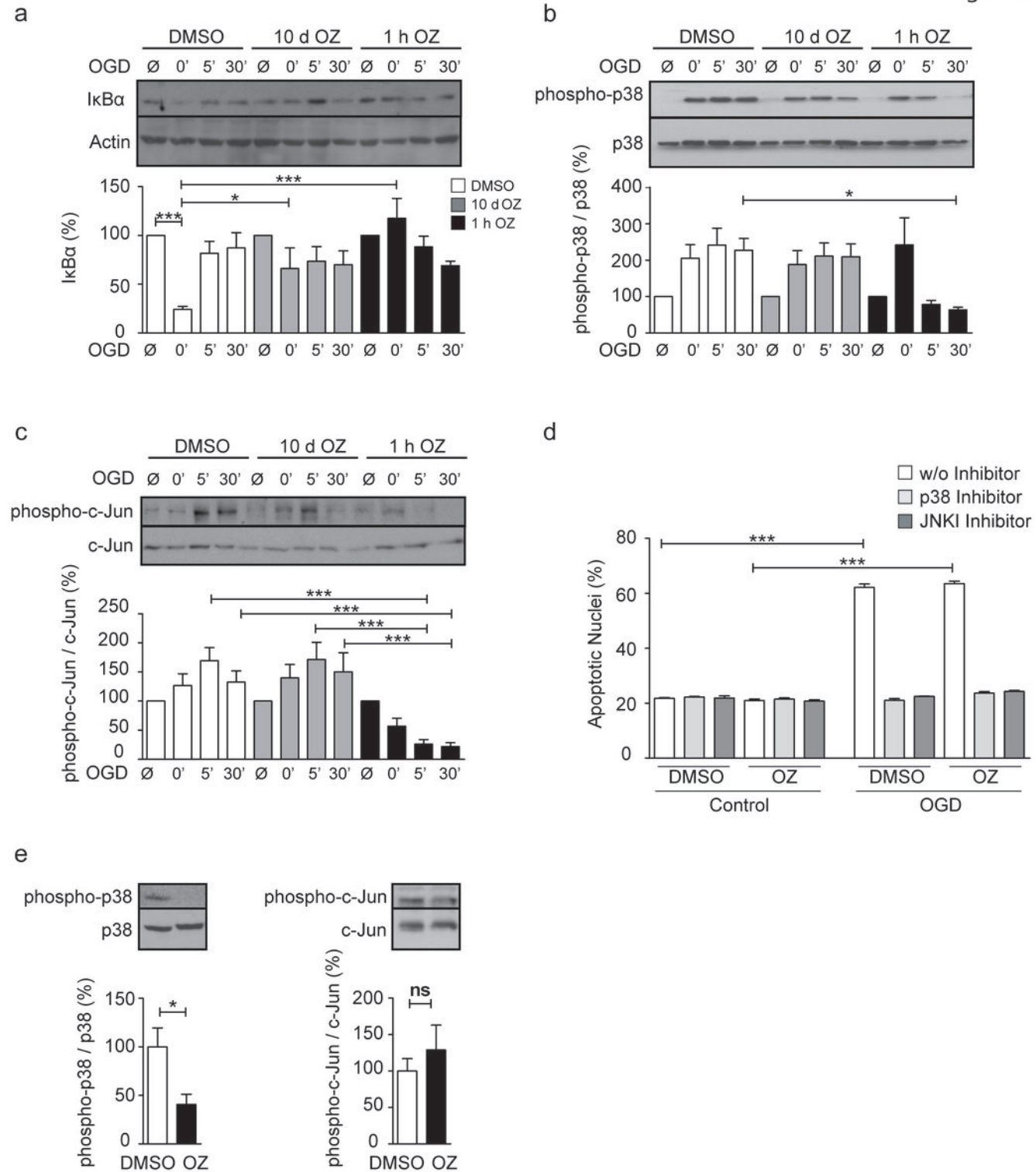


Figure 4

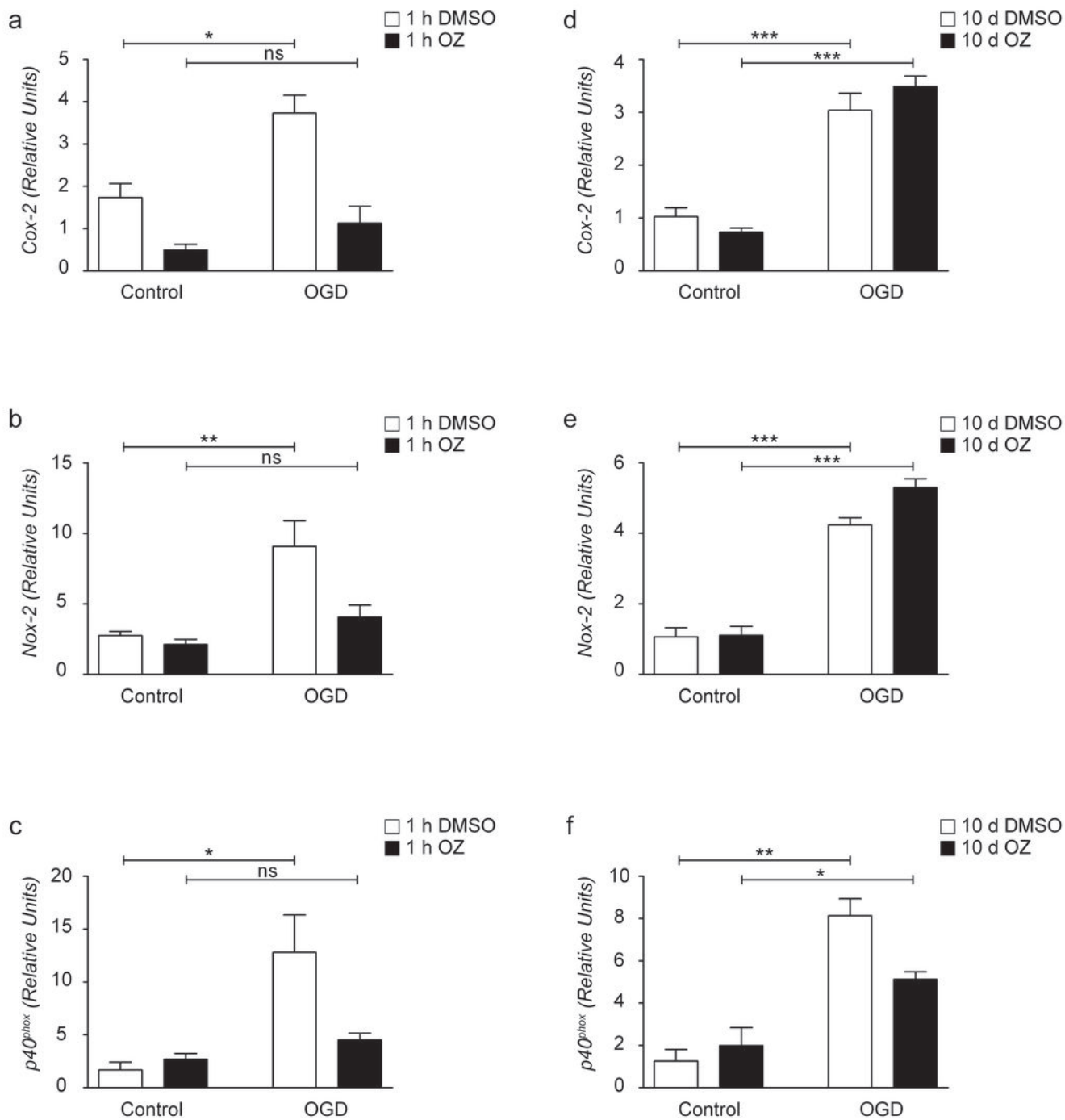


Figure 5

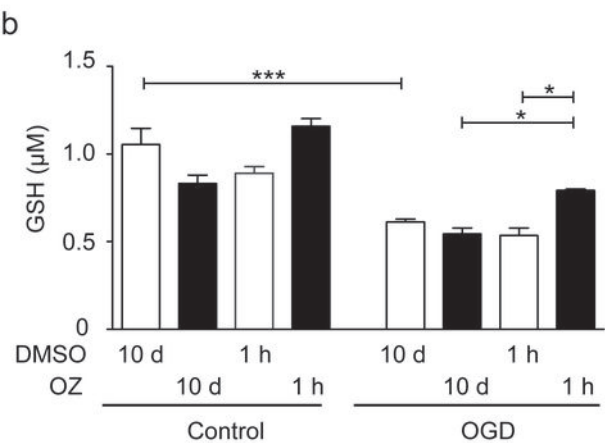
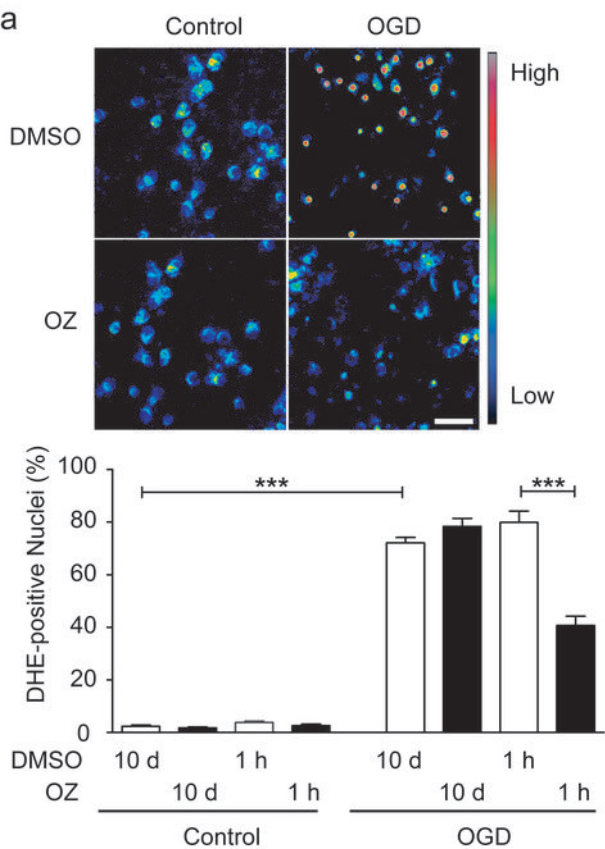
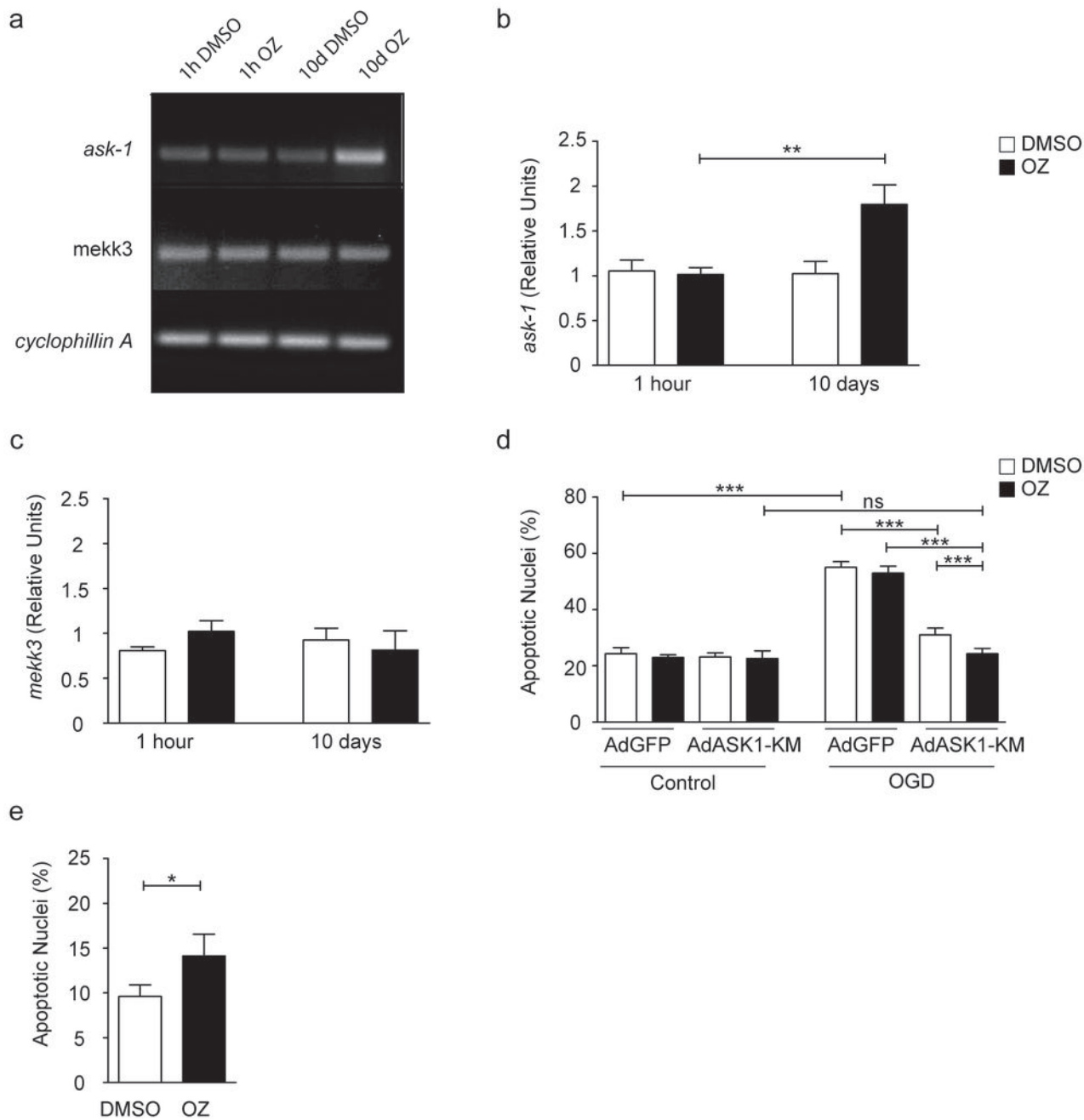
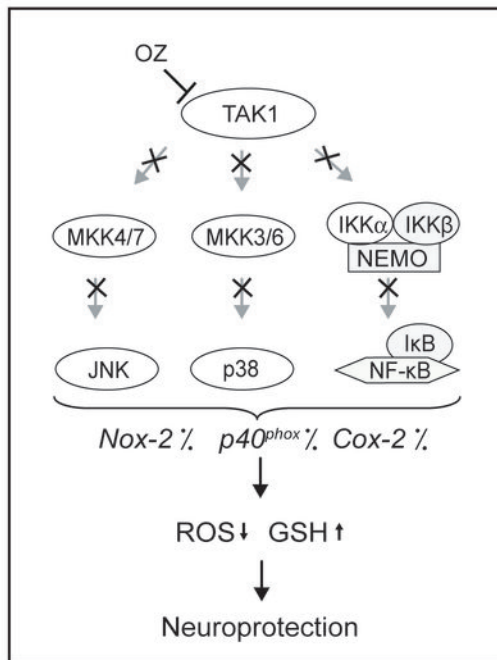


Figure 6



Acute TAK1 Inhibition



Chronic TAK1 Inhibition

