

Urinary cortisol metabolites are reduced in MDR1 mutant dogs in a pilot targeted GC-MS urinary steroid hormone metabolome analysis

Irina Gramer¹ | Emre Karakus¹ | Michaela F. Hartmann² | Stefan A. Wudy² |
Natali Bauer³ | Andreas Moritz³ | Zekeriya Aktürk⁴ | Joachim Geyer¹ 

¹Institute of Pharmacology and Toxicology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Giessen, Germany

²Steroid Research & Mass Spectrometry Unit, Pediatric Endocrinology & Diabetology, Center of Child and Adolescent Medicine, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Giessen, Germany

³Small Animal Clinic, Internal Medicine and Department of Veterinary Clinical Sciences, Clinical Pathophysiology and Clinical Pathology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Giessen, Germany

⁴Institute of Medicine, Technical University Munich, Munich, Germany

Correspondence

Joachim Geyer, Institute of Pharmacology and Toxicology, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Justus Liebig University Giessen, Giessen, Germany.
Email: Joachim.M.Geyer@vetmed.uni-giessen.de

Funding information

This study was supported in part by grants to E.K. from the Scholar Rescue Fund and by the Philipp Schwartz-Initiative of the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung. Funds for open access publication are received from Justus Liebig University Giessen.

Abstract

P-glycoprotein (P-gp) is the gene product of the multidrug resistance gene (MDR1, syn. ABCB1) that normally restricts the transfer of cortisol across the blood-brain barrier. In the absence of P-gp, cortisol access to the hypothalamus is increased and, by feedback inhibition, this finally leads to lower endogenous plasma cortisol levels in dogs with homozygous nt230(del4) MDR1 mutation (MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs). While a previous study only focused on plasma cortisol levels, the present study used urinary steroid hormone metabolites to analyze cortisol metabolism in MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs. Morning void urine was collected from 23 MDR1^{-/-} mutant and 16 MDR1^{+/+} normal dogs and was subjected to targeted GC-MS steroid hormone metabolome analysis. Seven cortisol metabolites, cortisol itself, and 13 other steroid metabolites were detected. In general, all cortisol metabolites were lower in the urine of the MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs, with allo-tetrahydro-cortisol and β -cortol reaching the level of significance. In addition, 11-keto-pregnane triol levels were significantly lower in the urine of the MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs, indicating that also the 17 α -OH-progesterone-derived metabolism was altered. In conclusion, the present study provides the first steroid hormone metabolome analysis in the urine of MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs. Significant differences in the steroid metabolome of MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs point to a significant role of P-gp for cortisol metabolism and excretion and so indirectly also for hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis regulation in dogs.

KEYWORDS

collie, cortisol, dog, MDR1 mutation, metabolomics, steroid, urine

1 | INTRODUCTION

P-glycoprotein (P-gp) is a multidrug efflux carrier and is encoded by the multidrug resistance gene *MDR1*, also referred to as ATP-binding cassette transporter gene *ABCB1*. Apart from many drugs and other xenobiotics, P-gp transports endogenous steroids such as

cortisol (Uhr et al., 2002). The carrier is expressed in organs with excretory function such as liver and kidney and at blood-tissue barriers such as the blood-brain barrier (Schinkel, 1998). Here, P-glycoprotein restricts compound entry into the brain. Indeed, experiments in mice deficient for both murine *mdr1a* and *mdr1b* P-gps (*mdr1a/1b*^{-/-} knockout mice) showed significantly higher

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brain penetration of [^3H]cortisol compared with wild-type controls (Mason et al., 2008; Uhr et al., 2002). Glucocorticoid actions particularly that of cortisol facilitate the ability to adapt to stress and recover from illness. Accordingly, cortisol levels are increased in critically ill intensive-care-unit patients, with the highest values being reported for highest illness-severity and highest mortality (Jurney et al., 1987). Stress, such as infection, pain, or physical exercise, activates the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, involving the secretion of corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH) by the hypothalamus that then triggers the release of the adrenocorticotropic hormone (ACTH) by the anterior pituitary (Vermes & Beishuizen, 2001). Subsequently, ACTH induces the release of glucocorticoid hormones, being cortisol in humans and corticosterone in rodents, from the adrenal cortex. Finally, increasing glucocorticoid levels exert negative feedback inhibition to terminate the stress-induced HPA axis activation by inhibiting the hypothalamic paraventricular nucleus and the hippocampus (Erkut et al., 1998). Based on this, the total amount of glucocorticoids reaching the hypothalamus from the blood is an essential factor for HPA regulation (Mason et al., 2008; Müller et al., 2003; Uhr et al., 2002).

Apart from *mdr1a/1b*^{-/-} knockout mice, some dogs are deficient for P-gp due to a 4-bp gene deletion mutation in the *MDR1* gene, commonly referred to as *MDR1* nt230(del4)/*MDR1*-1delta mutation. Dogs from the Collie, Longhaired Whippet, Australian Shepherd, Shetland Sheepdog, Silken Windhound, and White Swiss Shepherd breeds are particularly predisposed for this mutation (Gramer et al., 2011) and are suspected to have chronic HPA axis suppression due to higher glucocorticoid penetration into the brain in the absence of P-gp. Indeed, a study by Mealey et al. (Mealey et al., 2007) showed significantly lower basal plasma cortisol levels and significantly lower cortisol concentrations after ACTH administration in *MDR1*^{-/-} mutant dogs compared with *MDR1*^{+/+} normal dogs. In addition, plasma ACTH concentrations were significantly lower in the *MDR1*^{-/-} mutant dogs after dexamethasone administration, clearly indicating that P-gp plays a significant role for HPA axis regulation in the dog. It was suggested that the HPA axis suppression in the *MDR1*^{-/-} mutant dogs could be linked to a relative adrenal insufficiency. This might reduce the capacity to cope with stress or illness and also might have a poorer disease outcome in *MDR1*^{-/-} mutant dogs as it is known from human patients with relative adrenal insufficiency of different etiologies (Beishuizen & Thijs, 2001). However, as venipuncture to measure plasma cortisol levels is a stressful procedure for dogs, we aimed in the present study to determine the cortisol levels in *MDR1*^{-/-} mutant dogs in a completely non-invasive, stress-free procedure. For that, morning void urine was collected from *MDR1*^{-/-} mutant and *MDR1*^{+/+} normal dogs and was subjected to targeted gas chromatography–mass spectrometry (GC-MS) steroid hormone metabolome analysis. The second aim of the present study was the comprehensive analysis of the urinary steroid metabolome of *MDR1*^{-/-} mutant and *MDR1*^{+/+} normal dogs in order to investigate whether steroids other than cortisol and its metabolites are also dysregulated by the *MDR1* mutation in the dog.

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 | Animals and sampling

Dog owners who used the *MDR1* genotyping service at our institute were invited to participate in the present study. *MDR1* genotyping was performed as reported (Gramer et al., 2011). Inclusion criteria were as follows: (I) dog belongs to the Collie and Australian Shepherd breeds, (II) *MDR1* genotype is *MDR1*^{+/+} normal or *MDR1*^{-/-} mutant, and (III) dog is free of any diagnosed acute or chronic disease and medication at the sampling time. All dog owners who volunteered to take part in this study were advised to collect the first-morning void urine in appropriate collection vessels during spontaneous voiding of the dogs. Then, the urine was directly transferred to sterile urine cups. Breed, sex, castration status, age, *MDR1* genotype, special diet, and general activity of the dogs were recorded in a questionnaire. Urine collection induced no pain, suffering, or damage to the dogs, was non-invasive and stress-free, and did not disturb the normal behavior of the dogs. Urinary creatinine concentrations were determined with an enzymatic test and used for normalization of the urinary steroid metabolite concentrations. Briefly, urine protein was analyzed with the biuret method, and for measurement of urine creatinine, an enzymatic test was applied. Quantitative analysis of urine protein and creatinine was performed with the Pentra 400 ABX Horiba Diagnostics (Axon Lab AG, Reichenbach/Stuttgart, Germany) as reported before (Bauer et al., 2008). In addition, targeted GC-MS analysis of 36 steroid hormones and steroid hormone metabolites was carried out as reported before (Wudy et al., 2007, 2018). Briefly, free and conjugated urinary steroids were extracted from 5 ml urine by solid-phase extraction (Sep-Pak C18 cartridges, Waters), and conjugates were enzymatically hydrolyzed (sulfatase from helix pomatia type H-1, Sigma-Aldrich Chemie). After recovery of hydrolyzed steroids by a second solid-phase extraction, known amounts of internal standards (5 α -androstane-3 α ,17 α -diol (Paesel&Lorei), stigmasterol (Sigma-Aldrich Chemie)) were added to each extract before the formation of methyloxime-trimethylsilyl ethers (methoxyamine hydrochloride, Sigma-Aldrich Chemie; trimethylsilylimidazole, Macherey-Nagel). GC was performed using an Optima-1 fused silica column (length, 25 m; film thickness, 0.1 μm ; inner diameter, 0.2 mm; Macherey-Nagel) housed in an Agilent 6890 series GC system that was directly interfaced to an Agilent Technologies 5975 inert XL mass selective detector. The derivatized samples were analyzed during a temperature programmed run between 210 and 270 $^{\circ}\text{C}$. The MS was run in the selected ion monitoring mode. After calibration, values for the excretion of individual steroids were determined by measuring the selected ion peak areas against the internal standard areas. The urine concentrations of the steroid hormones and steroid hormone metabolites (in ng/L) were normalized for the urine creatinine concentrations (in mg/L).

2.2 | Statistics

Statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS version 25.0 software (SPSS Inc.). All variables were tested for normal distribution using the Shapiro–Wilk test. The Student's *t*-test was used to compare the means of continuous variables and normal-distributed data. When data were skewed, medians were compared with the Mann–Whitney *U* test. A level of $p < .05$ was considered statistically significant.

3 | RESULTS

In the present study, steroid metabolites were analyzed from the first-morning void urine from 39 healthy dogs by the dog owners. Of these 39 dogs, 24 were Collies, and 15 were Australian Shepherds (Table 1). The 24 Collies had the following MDR1 genotypes: MDR1^{+/+} (6 males and 3 females) and MDR1^{-/-} (8 males and 7 females). The 15 Australian Shepherds had the following MDR1 genotypes: MDR1^{+/+} (1 male and 6 females) and MDR1^{-/-} (4 males and 4 females). For all dogs, normal diet and general activity were reported. All data on breed, sex, castration status, and MDR1 genotype are summarized in Table 1.

In total, 36 steroid hormone metabolites (see Table 2) were analyzed via GC-MS and the creatinine-normalized concentration ratios (steroid (in ng/L)/creatinine (in mg/L)) are summarized in Table 3 and Table 4. In addition, a pathway diagram of the steroid metabolism is depicted in Figure 1 to allow better overview.

All cortisol metabolite levels were generally lower in the urine of the MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs compared with the MDR1^{+/+} normal dogs (Table 3, Figure 1). In the case of allo-tetrahydro-cortisol (α -THF) and β -cortol (β -C), these differences reached the level of significance ($p < .05$). The other cortisol metabolites, being tetrahydro-cortisol (THF; ratio, 0.6; 95% CI, 0.4–0.8), α -cortol (α -C; ratio, 0.8; 95% CI, 0.7–0.9), tetrahydro-cortisone (THE; ratio, 0.4; 95% CI, 0.2–0.6), α -cortolone (α -Cl; ratio, 0.7; 95% CI, 0.6–0.8), and β -cortolone (β -Cl; ratio, 0.5; 95% CI, 0.3–0.7), as well as cortisol itself (F; ratio, 0.8; 95% CI, 0.6–1.0) revealed mean urine concentrations in MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs at 40–80% of those in MDR1^{+/+} normal dogs (Table 3).

Among the group of 13 other quantifiable steroid metabolites listed in Table 4, only 11-keto-pregnanetriol (11-O-PT) was significantly reduced in MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs compared with MDR1^{+/+} normal dogs. Other steroid metabolites, being androstereone (AN; ratio, 0.6; 95% CI, 0.4–0.8), etiocholanolone (ET; ratio,

0.7; 95% CI, 0.5–0.9), 11-hydroxyandrosterone (11-OH-AN; ratio, 0.2; 95% CI, 0.0–0.4), 17 α -OH-pregnanolone (Po-5 β ,3 α ; ratio, 0.3; 95% CI, 0.0–0.6), pregnanetriol (PT; ratio, 0.7; 95% CI, 0.5–0.9), tetrahydro-compound A (THA; ratio, 0.5; 95% CI, 0.2–0.8), and tetrahydro-11-desoxycortisol (THS; ratio, 0.8; 95% CI, 0.6–1.0) revealed mean urine concentrations in MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs at 20%–80% of those in MDR1^{+/+} normal dogs. Comparable levels (90%–110%) were detected for 5-androstene-3 β ,17 α -diol (A5-3 β ,17 α ; ratio, 1.1), 11-hydroxyetiocholanolone (11-OH-ET; ratio, 0.9; 95% CI, 0.8–1.0), and tetrahydro-corticosterone (THB; ratio, 1.0; 95% CI, 1.0–1.0), while the concentrations of dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA; ratio, 1.2) and 5-androstene-3 β ,17 β -diol (A5-3 β ,17 β ; ratio, 1.5) were even higher in the urine of the MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs (Table 4).

Of note, several steroids could not be detected in any of the urine samples or were below the limit of quantification, thereby precluding statistical analysis. These were estrone (E1), estradiol (E2), estriol (E3), 16 α -OH-dehydroepiandrosterone (16 α -OH-DHEA), pregnanediol (P5D), allo-tetrahydro-corticosterone (α -THB), 6 β -hydroxycortisol (6 β -OH-F), and tetrahydro-11-desoxycorticosterone (THDOC). Furthermore, we could detect and quantify some steroids only in the urine of very few dogs, being testosterone (T, one dog, steroid/creatinine ratio =38.0), 17 α -OH-pregnanolone-5 α (Po-5 α 3 α , three dogs, steroid/creatinine ratio =4.2–5.1), pregnanediol (PD, one dog, steroid/creatinine ratio =45.4), androstenetriol-16 α (A5T-16 α , three dogs, steroid/creatinine ratio =4.6–8.0), pregnanetriol-17 α (P5T-17 α , three dogs, steroid/creatinine ratio =2.9–178.6), 20 α -dihydrocortisol (20 α -DHF, three dogs, steroid/creatinine ratio =11.8–15.6), and 11-keto-androsteron (11-O-AN, 2 dogs, steroid/creatinine ratio =7.63–8.39).

4 | DISCUSSION

Urine is the major excretory pathway for steroid metabolites in dogs (Schatz & Palme, 2001; Williams et al., 2000). About 90% of all steroid hormone metabolites, which are mostly catabolized by reduction and hydroxylation processes, are excreted via the kidneys. Therefore, the urinary steroid metabolite profile mirrors the steroid metabolism of the body (Vitkin et al., 2014) and permits diagnosis of steroid-related disorders (Wudy & Hartmann, 2004). The clinical indications for the measurement of urinary steroid hormone metabolites have been outlined in international guidelines for human medicine (Allende et al., 2014; Kulle et al., 2017;

TABLE 1 MDR1 genotypes, sex, castration status, and breed of the dogs. Urine samples were collected from 39 client-owned dogs that were previously analyzed for the nt230(del4) MDR1 mutation as part of the diagnostic research service at our institute

MDR1 genotype	n	Sex	Breeds
MDR1 ^{-/-}	23	7 SF, 4 F, 3 CM, 9 M	15 Collie, 8 Australian Shepherds
MDR1 ^{+/+}	16	1 SF, 8 F, 2 CM, 5 M	9 Collies, 7 Australian Shepherd

Note: Only dogs from the Collie and Australian Shepherd breeds that were diagnosed with either MDR1^{-/-} or MDR1^{+/+} were included. All dogs were free of any diagnosed acute or chronic disease and medication at the sampling time.

CM, castrated male; F, female; M, male; SF, spayed female.

TABLE 2 Overview on all steroids analyzed by GC-MS

Abbreviation	Trivial name	Systematic name	LOD [pg]	LLOQ [μ g/l]
β -C	β -Cortol	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,11 β ,17 α ,20 β ,21-pentol	6.3	3.13
α -C	α -Cortol	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,11 β ,17 α ,20 α ,21-pentol	6.3	3.13
α -Cl	α -Cortolone	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,17 α ,20 α ,21-tetrol-11-one	6.3	3.13
β -Cl	β -Cortolone	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,17 α ,20 β ,21-tetrol-11-one	6.3	3.13
α -THB	Allo-tetrahydro-corticosterone	5 α -Pregnane-3 α ,11 β ,21-triol-20-one	12.5	6.25
α -THF	Allo-tetrahydro-cortisol	5 α -Pregnane-3 α ,11 β ,17 α ,21-tetrol-20-one	12.5	6.25
11-O-AN	11-Keto-androsterone	5 α -Androstane-3 α -ol-11,17-dione	12.5	6.25
11-OH-AN	11-Hydroxyandrosterone	5 α -Androstane-3 α ,11 β -diol-17-one	6.3	3.13
11-OH-ET	11-Hydroxyetiocholanolone	5 β -Androstane-3 α ,11 β -diol-17-one	12.5	6.25
11-O-PT	11-Keto-pregnanetriol	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,17 α ,20 α -triol-11-one	3.1	1.56
16 α -OH-DHEA	16 α -OH-DHEA	5-Androstene-3 β ,16 α -diol-17-one	25.0	12.50
20 α -DHF	20 α -Dihydrocortisol	4-Pregnene-11 β ,17 α ,20 α ,21-tetrol-3-one	25.0	12.50
6 β -OH-F	6 β -Hydroxycortisol	4-Pregnene-6 β ,11 β ,17 α ,21-tetrol-3,20-dione	25.0	25.00
A5-3 β ,17 α	5-Androstene-3 β ,17 α -diol	5-Androstene-3 β ,17 α -diol	12.5	6.25
A5-3 β ,17 β	5-Androstene-3 β ,17 β -diol	5-Androstene-3 β ,17 β -diol	12.5	6.25
A5T-16 α	Androstenetriol-16 α	5-Androstene-3 β ,16 α ,17 β -triol	6.3	3.13
AN	Androsterone	5 α -Androstane-3 α -ol-17-on	6.3	3.13
DHEA	Dehydroepiandrosterone	5-Androstene-3 β -ol-17-on	25.0	12.50
E1	Estrone	Estrone	12.5	6.25
E2	Estradiol	Estradiol	6.3	3.13
E3	Estriol	Estriol	6.3	3.13
ET	Etiocholanolone	5 β -Androstane-3 α -ol-17-on	6.3	3.13
F	Cortisol	4-Pregnene-11 β ,17 α ,21-triol-3,20-dione	25.0	12.50
P5D	Pregnanediol	5-Pregnene-3 β ,20 α -diol	8.1	4.20
P5T-17 α	Pregnenetriol-17 α	5-Pregnene-3 β ,17 α ,20 α -triol	6.3	3.13
PD	Pregnanediol	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,20 α -diol	12.5	6.25
Po-5 β ,3 α	17 α -OH-Pregnanolone	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,17 α -diol-20-one	6.3	3.13
Po-5 α ,3 α	17 α -OH-Pregnanolone-5 α	5 α -Pregnane-3 α ,17 α -diol-20-one	6.3	3.13
PT	Pregnanetriol	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,17 α ,20 α -triol	1.6	0.78
T	Testosterone	Testosterone	12.5	6.25
THA	Tetrahydro-compound A	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,21-diol-11,20-dione	25.0	12.50
THB	Tetrahydro-corticosterone	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,11 β ,21-triol-20-one	12.5	6.25
THDOC	Tetrahydro-11-desoxycorticosterone	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,21-diol-20-one	12.5	6.25
THE	Tetrahydro-cortisone	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,17 α ,21-triol-11,20-dione	12.5	6.25
THF	Tetrahydro-cortisol	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,11 β ,17 α ,21-tetrol-20-one	12.5	6.25
THS	Tetrahydro-11-desoxycortisol	5 β -Pregnane-3 α ,17 α ,21-triol-20-one	12.5	6.25

Abbreviations: LOD, limit of detection; LLOQ, lower limit of quantification.

Wood et al., 2008; Wudy et al., 2018), but have been scarcely studied in veterinary species. However, plasma steroid hormone concentrations are important established laboratory parameters in veterinary medicine, too.

The present study used GC-MS based urinary steroid metabolome analysis to answer the question if cortisol and its metabolites are less excreted in the urine of MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs. These dogs showed significantly lower basal plasma cortisol levels in a previous

study compared with MDR1^{+/+} normal dogs, suggesting increased suppression of the HPA axis in the absence of P-gp (Mealey et al., 2007). These findings are clearly supported by data from the present study that showed significantly lower urinary concentrations of α -THF and β -C, among generally lower levels of all measured cortisol metabolites in the urine of MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs (Table 3, Figure 1). Therefore, urinary α -THF and β -C can be regarded as potential non-invasive markers for cortisol levels in MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs. These

TABLE 3 Urinary cortisol and cortisol metabolites in MDR1^{-/-} and MDR1^{+/+} dogs

Cortisol and cortisol metabolites	MDR1 ^{-/-}		MDR1 ^{+/+}		MDR1 ^{-/-} / MDR1 ^{+/+}	
	Mean ± SD	n	Mean ± SD	n	Ratio [95% CI]	p-value
F (cortisol)	16.4 ± 7.1	13	19.8 ± 13.6	10	0.8 [0.6–1.0]	.410
α-THF	11.2 ± 3.4	17	20.7 ± 14.9	12	0.5 [0.3–0.7]	.006*
THF	102.6 ± 68.7	23	176.2 ± 210.2	16	0.6 [0.4–0.8]	.217
α-C	12.6 ± 7.9	22	16.1 ± 11.2	12	0.8 [0.7–0.9]	.231
β-C	105.5 ± 63.3	23	221.0 ± 225.5	15	0.5 [0.3–0.7]	.025*
THE	22.7 ± 15.9	22	52.2 ± 88.2	14	0.4 [0.2–0.6]	.170
α-Cl	16.5 ± 9.7	23	22.5 ± 17.3	15	0.7 [0.6–0.8]	.153
β-Cl	170.7 ± 128.9	23	332.9 ± 426.5	16	0.5 [0.3–0.7]	.196

Note: Data represent means ± SD creatinine-normalized urinary steroid concentrations represented by the steroid (in ng/L)/creatinine (in mg/L) ratios. In addition, 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) are provided for the MDR1^{-/-} / MDR1^{+/+} ratios. *Significantly different values with $p < .05$ in MDR1^{-/-} dogs compared with MDR1^{+/+} dogs.

TABLE 4 Urinary non-cortisol steroid hormones and their metabolites in MDR1^{-/-} and MDR1^{+/+} dogs

Steroids and steroid metabolites	MDR1 ^{-/-}		MDR1 ^{+/+}		MDR1 ^{-/-} / MDR1 ^{+/+}	
	Mean ± SD	n	Mean ± SD	n	Ratio [95% CI]	p-value
AN	9.0 ± 3.2	8	15.6 ± 9.1	8	0.6 [0.4–0.8]	.076
DHEA	14.8 ± 1.5	2	12.0 ± 3.9	3	1.2 [NA]	.421
ET	11.1 ± 4.2	8	17.0 ± 7.1	9	0.7 [0.5–0.9]	.060
A5-3β,17α	10.1 ± 3.2	7	9.3 ± 2.4	3	1.1 [NA]	.708
A5-3β,17β	10.0 ± 0.0	2	6.7 ± 2.1	3	1.5 [NA]	.124
11-OH-AN	4.5 ± 1.2	5	22.6 ± 44.7	8	0.2 [0.0–0.4]	.127
11-OH-ET	26.2 ± 17.8	9	27.6 ± 14.7	8	0.9 [0.8–1.0]	.226
11-O-PT	1.9 ± 0.9	12	7.9 ± 16.5	12	0.2 [0.0–0.4]	.024*
Po-5β,3α	9.7 ± 7.3	4	34.4 ± 71.5	8	0.3 [0.0–0.6]	.682
PT	5.9 ± 9.0	8	8.2 ± 20.4	12	0.7 [0.5–0.9]	.776
THA	15.1 ± 5.2	6	28.7 ± 27.5	4	0.5 [0.2–0.8]	.781
THB	21.3 ± 19.4	16	21.8 ± 15.7	8	1.0 [1.0–1.0]	.648
THS	7.1 ± 1.6	8	8.8 ± 1.6	4	0.8 [0.6–1.0]	.096

Note: Data represent means ± SD creatinine-normalized urinary steroid concentrations represented by the steroid (in ng/L)/creatinine (in mg/L) ratios. In addition, 95% confidence intervals (95% CI) are provided for the MDR1^{-/-} / MDR1^{+/+} ratios. *Significantly different values with $p < .05$ in MDR1^{-/-} dogs compared with MDR1^{+/+} dogs.

Abbreviation: NA, not available.

findings go in line with the current understanding of chronic suppression of the HPA axis due to increased hypothalamic cortisol feedback regulation in the absence of P-gp in the blood–brain barrier (Figure 2).

The aim of the present study was to analyze cortisol and its metabolites in a completely non-invasive and stress-free environment to avoid measurement artifacts of stress-induced cortisol release, which cannot be ruled out when dealing with dogs for venipuncture or even for intensive clinical monitoring. Therefore, for steroid measurements, we used dog urine collected by the owners in the dogs' natural environment without any stress or intervention.

Consequently, this study design had some limitations that need to be clearly stated: the dogs were not subjected to intensive clinical health monitoring, and the dogs' diet and physical activity were not standardized. However, only dogs were included that were free of any diagnosed disease or medication and only dogs with normal diet and general activity were included. Nevertheless, the possible influence of confounding factors such as activity, diet, and subject health at the sampling time cannot be completely ruled out. In addition, the total sample number was too low to carry out additional multivariate regression analyses on possible effects of breed, sex, age, and castration status of the dogs.

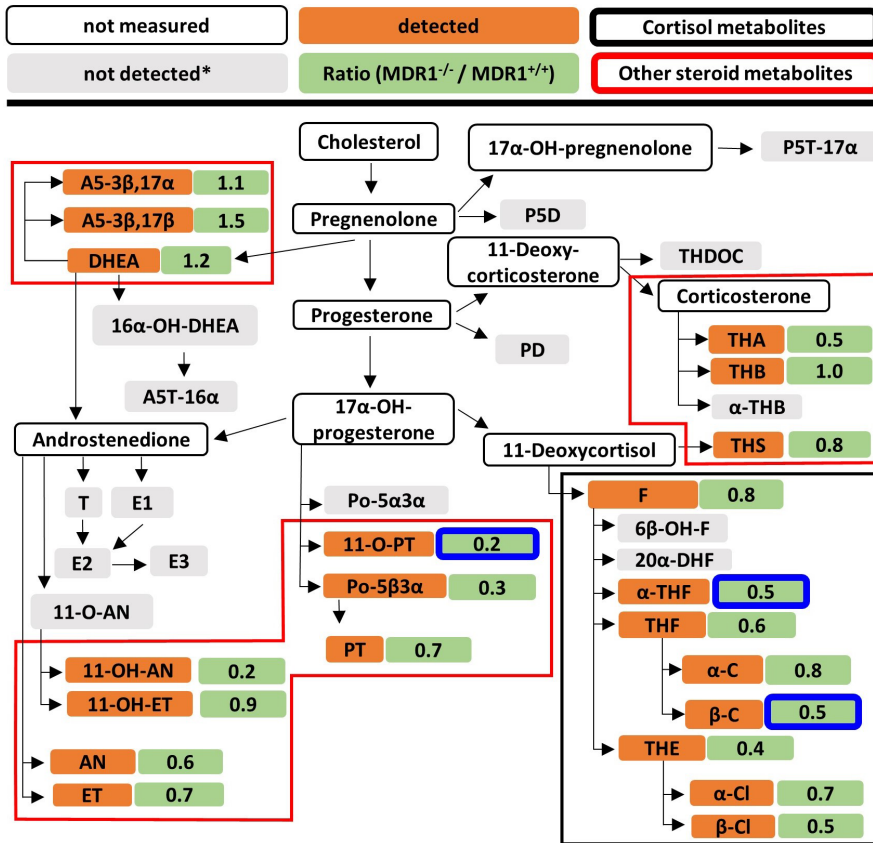


FIGURE 1 Pathways of dog steroid hormone biosynthesis and metabolism. Pathways are partly combined to provide better overview on 36 urinary steroid metabolites measured in the present study. Metabolite abbreviations (detected metabolites in orange and non-detected metabolites in gray), and MDR1^{-/-}/MDR1^{+/+} ratios (green) are given. *Not detected or detected in only few dogs. Ringed in blue: Significantly different between MDR1^{-/-} mutant MDR1^{+/+} normal dogs (α -THF, p -value = .006; β -C, p -value = .025; 11-O-PT, p -value = .024). The p -values and the 95% CI are given in Table 3 and Table 4. For all abbreviations, please refer to Table 2

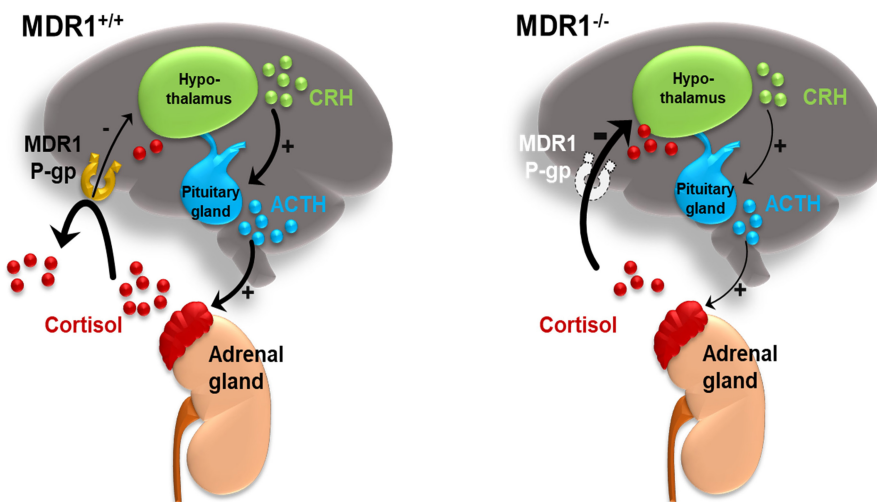


FIGURE 2 Illustration of the increased brain penetration of cortisol in the absence of P-gp (MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs) and the subsequent suppression of the HPA axis

The second aim of the study was to measure also non-cortisol metabolites in the urine to analyze whether P-gp might also play a role for their regulation and excretion. Only few studies addressed the impact of urinary steroid hormone metabolite excretion on the diagnosis of different diseases in dogs so far. These previous studies measured only cortisol and oxytocin metabolites (Wirobski et al., 2021), or THE and THF (Quilez et al., 2020) from the morning void urine. Another study compared the urinary corticoid-to-creatinine ratio to discriminate healthy from hypercortisolism dogs (Galeandro et al., 2014). A more recent study showed that adrenocortical urinary steroid metabolites could be successfully detected in healthy,

septic, and septic shock dogs using GC-MS and revealed that urinary metabolite concentrations of 5 α -tetrahydro-cortisol, THE, β -C, α -Cl, β -Cl, and total metabolites were higher in septic shock dogs compared with septic dogs (Boag et al., 2020). Additionally, all steroid metabolites except androsterone exhibited significantly increased levels in septic or septic shock dogs (Boag et al., 2020). On this background, the impact of the comprehensive measurement of 13 steroids and steroid metabolites in the urine of MDR1^{-/-} mutant and MDR1^{+/+} normal dogs has to be emphasized.

Interestingly, among the group of other steroid metabolites 11-O-PT was also significantly lower in the urine of MDR1^{-/-} mutant

dogs compared with the MDR1^{+/+} normal dogs. The same was true for AN and ET, even if these values did not fully reach the level of significance. These findings indicated that apart from cortisol metabolism, P-gp might also play a role for the regulation, metabolism, and excretion of other steroid hormones descent from 17 α -OH-progesterone and/or androstenedione. However, whether this is also associated with a suppression of the HPA axis must be investigated in follow-up studies, which also measure the plasma concentrations of the relevant steroids with and without ACTH stimulation.

In conclusion, the present study for the first time provides comprehensive steroid metabolome analysis in the urine of MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs. Significant differences in MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs indicate that P-gp is involved in cortisol regulation, metabolism, and excretion and seems also to play a role for the urinary excretion of steroid hormones descent from 17 α -OH-progesterone. Urinary α -THF and β -C are suggested as potential non-invasive markers for cortisol levels in MDR1^{-/-} mutant dogs.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank all the dog owners for their support in collecting the urine samples. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, I.G., S.A.W., J.G.; methodology, I.G., E.K., M.F.H., S.A.W., N.B., A.M., J.G.; investigation, I.G., M.F.H., N.B.; data analysis, I.G., E.K., M.F.H., S.A.W., N.B., A.M., Z.A., J.G.; resources, S.A.W., A.M., J.G.; writing - original draft preparation, I.G., E.K., M.F.H., N.B., J.G.; writing - review and editing, E.K., M.F.H., S.A.W., N.B., A.M., Z.A., J.G.. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

ANIMAL WELFARE AND ETHICS STATEMENT

Collection of the urine samples was completely non-invasive, induced no pain, suffering, or damage to the dogs and did not disturb the normal behavior of the dogs. Therefore, ethical review and approval was not necessary. All dog owners were actively involved in the sample collection and consented to the use of the urine samples for the present study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data are available on request from the authors.

ORCID

Joachim Geyer  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2663-1858>

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How to cite this article: Gramer, I., Karakus, E., Hartmann, M. F., Wudy, S. A., Bauer, N., Moritz, A., Aktürk, Z., & Geyer, J. (2022). Urinary cortisol metabolites are reduced in MDR1 mutant dogs in a pilot targeted GC-MS urinary steroid hormone metabolome analysis. *Journal of Veterinary Pharmacology and Therapeutics*, 45, 265–272. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jvp.13050>