Long-Term Unit Recording from Somatosensory Neurons in the Spinal Ganglia of the Freely Walking Cat

G. E. Loeb, M. J. Bak and J. Duysens
Long-Term Unit Recording from Somatosensory Neurons in the Spinal Ganglia of the Freely Walking Cat

Abstract. A new technique has been developed for stable, long-term recording from groups of individual primary afferent neurons in the freely walking cat. A number of fine, flexible wires are inserted into dorsal root ganglia via a small laminotomy in the lumbar spine. The cut end of each wire can record stable and separable action potentials from one to three dorsal root-ganglion-neurons; each unit has typically held for 1 to 4 days. A broad range of myelinated somatosensory afferents (conduction velocities of 30 to 120 meters per second) have been studied during locomotion. Most cutaneous and proprioceptive afferents studied have been sensitive monitors of complex combinations of step-cycle components, and their firing patterns would often have been difficult to predict from existing information.

Recent progress in the study of motor systems has been greatly facilitated by the introduction of long-term single-neuron recording, as, for example, from neurons in the motor cortex of monkeys performing tasks (I). No comparable technique has been developed for monitoring primary somatosensory feedback, known to be vital to the fine control of locomotion, although short-term records have been obtained for the specialized movements of mastication in the intact animal (2) and fine finger positioning in man (3). Previous attempts to record for a long period from peripheral nerve or dorsal root fibers in walking animals have produced short-term single- or multiple-unit records only from the largest ิ.ร.ย. 1 proprioceptive fibers (4). Studies of a-fanent input during "automaton" walking, as in the acute mesencephalic cat preparations (5), are less than satisfactory because of the necessity for restraining the animal and abnormal supraspinal activity. We now present a method for long-term recording of activity from individual dorsal root ganglion (DRG) afferent neurons in a freely walking cat. Myelinated afferents with conduction velocities from 30 to 120 m/sec have been routinely held for 1 to 4 days, with new units usually replacing those which have drifted away. As many as seven microelectrodes have been inserted into one DRG, and each typically records from one to three units with distinctive waveforms, which can be studied separately through the use of a window discriminator (6). The DRG site, although somewhat awkwardly situated in the spinal canal, has the advantage of containing large cell bodies (40 to 80 μm) packed tightly together in a tough stabilizing matrix of connective tissue. Relatively large but flexible electrode wires (having large tips, low impedance, and excellent noise immunity) can readily record large extracellular unit action potentials from several cell bodies (7).

Figure 1 shows a typical preparation and the surgical technique for fixing and implanting the 50-μm (diameter) insulated wires (8). The wires are passed through a shielded, flexible Silastic tube, which is fixed by sutures through holes drilled in the spinous process. The wires are cut at an oblique angle to expose a beveled tip, which is pushed by hand through the dural-epineural sheath into the ganglion while the tip impedance is being monitored. A small amount of slack is left to take up the sliding movement undergone by the DRG during walking because of normal traction on the sciatic nerve. The electrodes "float" in the DRG (9) and sample units at random from a population that appears to...
have little or no spatial or sensory modality organization (10). After the laminotomy incision is closed, the saddle connector is sewn through the skin to the fascia on either side of the incision, and the electrode leads are soldered to the connector and potted in Medical Adhesive A. Such saddle assemblies are well tolerated for weeks without any sign of infection or discomfort to the cat (11). The laminotomy is minimal and the dura is not opened; the animals usually walk normally in 24 to 48 hours without any limp that is visible on videotape recordings.

On each day after the operation, a multichannel frequency-modulated (FM) tape recording is made of the signals from the microelectrodes. electromyographic (EMG) electrodes, and other implanted transducers (Fig. 1) along with a synchronized videotape recording of gait at various treadmill speeds and with various perturbations (for example, upgrade walking and electrical stimulation). The animal is then lightly anesthetized with ketamine, and the units on each electrode are identified by manipulation and electrical and mechanical stimulation of the leg. Small dissections may be undertaken to further identify units, obtain conduction velocities, or implant additional EMG electrodes. Additional electrodes can be connected to unused amplifier channels during the next day's run to provide further information on proprioceptors related to the muscle. Spike amplitude and shape are usually stable and distinctive, permitting reliable reidentification of units from day to day (12).

Figure 2 shows the simultaneous unit activity of three DRG cells during walking: Two of the units were recorded from one electrode (K-X5) and separated by spike shape as shown in the unit records at the left. Unit shape and amplitude were essentially unchanged 12 hours later when the receptors were characterized during a dissection under pentobarbital anesthesia. During locomotion, each unit in Fig. 2 responded consistently during certain phases of each step cycle.

The two guard hair-cell receptors (J) (Fig. 2) exhibit sensitive and stereotyped responses that would be difficult to predict. Unit K-X5A (from L7 DRG) was a reliable indicator of footlift and -fall, despite its location on the dorsum of the toes, probably because of small rubbing motions between hairs on adjacent toes. Unit K-Y7A (from the DRG at the first sacral spinal level (S1) in the same animal) had a receptive field on the plantar surface between the central and lateral toe pads, yet it generated much of its activity during the late swing phase and had variable silent periods while the foot was on the ground (stance phase of gait) (14). Such sensitive and reproducible responses in rapidly conducting fibers might be useful for signaling timing information from step to step but might be labile from day to day as hairs grow, shed, or are damaged.

Joint receptors, while exhibiting little sensitivity to midrange joint angle changes alone, are sensitive to the combination of joint position and capsule tension produced by inserting muscles (15). Unit K-X5D was a knee-joint receptor identified under anesthesia by dissection and stimulated of the posterior articular nerve (16). The firing pattern of this unit during walking could not be explained by a simple consideration of knee-joint angle, joint loading, or velocity of movement alone. Knee extension in the late swing phase was accompanied by an accelerating discharge and followed by a variable burst just after footfall. Small fluctuations in ankle angle (which are necessarily reflected in knee angle during stance) were clearly reflected in the firing pattern during the stance phase of each step cycle. The unit could be modulated from 0 to 200 pulses per second by movements of less than 5° even when we partially unloaded the knee by supporting the hips. Two other knee-joint receptors studied responded to very small external rotations of the joint (independent of flexion-extension and before appreciable resistance was encountered); one had almost no activity during walking, and the other was smoothly modulated during stance over the range 0 to 150 pulses per second (17).

Our records of muscle receptors are still too scattered among the many hindlimb muscles for us to state general conclusions beyond agreement with Prochazka et al. (4), that spindle primaries are apparently responsive to both passive stretch and, more variably, coactivation of the alpha and gamma motor systems.

Although most units showing any activity during walking were modulated by some aspect or aspects of the step cycle, others appear to respond to nonlocomotory rhythms. Proprioceptors from the lower back and hip can respond in phase with respiration, even during locomotion. Rhythmic bursting uninfluenced by any apparent physiological function (for example, pulse, respiration, attentiveness, and gait), by mechanical stimuli (including visceral pressure), or by anesthesia has been seen.

To date, a total of 67 units from 11 cats have been identified (52 from L7, 15 from S1 DRG). Most of the units on which conduction velocity was measured were in the range 30 to 120 m/sec, but we have identified one cutaneous A-delta class fiber (7 m/sec) and one cutaneous C fiber (0.8 m/sec). We suspect that some of the unidentified spontaneously active cells (for example, those showing rhythmic bursting) (ten total to date) may have been sympathetic, thermal, or other small afferent cells with free endings.
and that other inactive sympathetic or high-threshold slow afferents may have been overlooked. Of the physiologically identified units, 33 were cutaneous (18 hair, 8 pressure, 7 other) and 24 were proprioceptive (11 spindle primaries, 4 spindle secondaries, 4 Golgi tendon organs, 5 knee joint). Of the 18 hair receptors, 13 had stable activity patterns during walking, although 7 of the 13 had receptive fields not contacted by any object during walking. Units responsive to light touch were usually active when their fields were directly contacted, but proprioceptive fields not contacted by any identified units.


5. J. A. Hoffer and W. B. Marks, paper presented at the 4th annual meeting, Society for Neurosciences, St. Louis, Mo., 20 to 24 October 1975.


9. Electrode impedance is 100 to 250 kilohms and is stable for more than 2 months. Thermal, ambient, and biological noise is usually below 20 μV peak to peak, and action potentials are typically 50 to 400 μV. Electrodes correctly inserted into the DRG proper almost always record separable units unless and until the insulation deteriorates.


