


Mammalian puberty: a fly perspective

Juan Guirado, Juan Carranza-Valencia and Javier Morante 

Instituto de Neurociencias, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC) and Universidad Miguel Hernández (UMH), San Juan de Alicante, Spain

Keywords

apolipoprotein; kisspeptin; leptin; metamorphosis; neuroendocrine axis; peripheral fat; puberty; ribosomal maturation; semaphorin; sexual maturation

Correspondence

J. Morante, Instituto de Neurociencias, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC) and Universidad Miguel Hernández (UMH), Avenida Ramon y Cajal s/n, 03550 San Juan de Alicante, Spain
Tel: +34 965919593
E-mail: j.morante@umh.es

Juan Guirado and Juan Carranza-Valencia contributed equally to this article

(Received 16 February 2022, revised 2 May 2022, accepted 23 May 2022)

doi:10.1111/febs.16534

Mammalian puberty and *Drosophila* metamorphosis, despite their evolutionary distance, exhibit similar design principles and conservation of molecular components. In this Viewpoint, we review recent advances in this area and the similarities between both processes in terms of the signaling pathways and neuroendocrine circuits involved. We argue that the detection and uptake of peripheral fat by *Drosophila* prothoracic endocrine cells induces endomembrane remodeling and ribosomal maturation, leading to the acquisition of high biosynthetic and secretory capacity. The absence of this fat–neuroendocrine interorgan communication leads to giant, obese, non-pupating larvae. Importantly, human leptin is capable of signaling the pupariation process in *Drosophila*, and its expression prevents obesity and triggers maturation in mutants that do not pupate. This implies that insect metamorphosis can be used to address issues related to the biology of leptin and puberty.

Introduction

Puberty marks the transformation of the child into the adult. It constitutes a point of no return defined as the transitional period when sexual maturity is achieved along with important growth and behavioral changes

[1,2]. When this change is initiated, upregulation of steroidogenesis leads to an irreversible juvenile-to-adult transition in humans. Insect metamorphosis is the developmental transition comparable to human

Abbreviations

5-HT, 5-hydroxytryptamine; 5-HT7, 5-hydroxytryptamine receptor 7; Alk, anaplastic lymphoma kinase; AMPK, AMP-activated protein kinase; apolpp, apolipoprotein; AstA, allatostatin A; AstAR1, allatostatin receptor 1; Crz, corazonin; CrzR, corazonin receptor; Dpp, decapentaplegic; EGFR, epidermal growth factor receptor; ERK, extracellular-signal-regulated kinase; GAPDH, glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase; Gce, germ cell-expressed; GnRH, gonadotropin-releasing hormone hypothalamic neurons; GRASP, green fluorescent protein reconstitution across synaptic partners; HPG, hypothalamic–pituitary–gonadal axis; IGF1, insulin-like growth factor I; IIS, insulin/insulin-like growth factor; Kiss1R, kisspeptin-1 receptor; KNDy, kisspeptin/neurokinin B/dynorphin neurons; Kr-h1, Krüppel homolog 1; Lgr3, leucine-rich repeat-containing G protein-coupled receptor 3; MAP, mitogen-activated protein; MC3R, melanocortin receptor 3; MC4R, melanocortin receptor 4; Met, methoprene-tolerant; mTOR, mammalian target of rapamycin; NPY/AgRP, neuropeptide Y and agouti-related peptide neurons; Octβ3R, β3-octopamine receptor; PDF, pigment-dispersing factor; PG, prothoracic gland; POMC/CART, pro-opiomelanocortin and cocaine- and amphetamine-regulated transcript neurons; PTTH, prothoracicotrophic hormone; SE0_{PG}, stomatogastric serotonergic neurons; Sema1a, semaphorin1a; SIRT1, sirtuin 1; TGF-β, transforming growth factor-β; TkV, thickveins; tor, torso; TSC2, tumor suppressor tuberous sclerosis complex 2 and upd2: unpaired 2.

puberty, and despite more than 500 million years of evolutionary distance between insects and mammals, recent studies summarized in this Viewpoint have shown that the transition from juvenile to adult is well conserved in both and that it is governed by common molecular aspects ([3] and Fig. 1).

Endocrine control of mammalian puberty

In mammals, the reawakening of the hypothalamic–pituitary–gonadal (HPG) axis is what triggers pubertal maturation (Fig. 1). In response to incompletely defined nutrient, endocrine and environmental signals, neuroendocrine gonadotropin-releasing hormone (GnRH) hypothalamic neurons increase their firing properties [4,5], which stimulates the pituitary gland to release the gonadotropins luteinizing hormone and follicle-stimulating hormone. These hormones are then delivered via the circulatory system to promote the

maturation of the gonads and the production of sex steroids, which signal back to the HPG axis.

GnRH neurons have the particularity of developing embryonically outside the brain, in the nasal placode, and they migrate to their final position in the hypothalamus before birth [6]. In addition, GnRH neurons during postnatal life recruit other populations—neuronal, glial (tanycytes and astrocytes), and endothelial—that connect with them to establish the ‘GnRH neural network’ [7–9]. This neural network fine-tunes GnRH production and secretion in time and space. Therefore, defects in the GnRH neurons themselves, or in the GnRH neural network, result in defective or delayed puberty [10]. Interestingly, the intercellular communication within the GnRH neural network is predominantly mediated by semaphorin signaling, which plays a fundamental role in the development of hypothalamic circuits but also in the control of GnRH release by circulating sex steroids [11]. Defective semaphorin signaling leads to hypogonadotropic

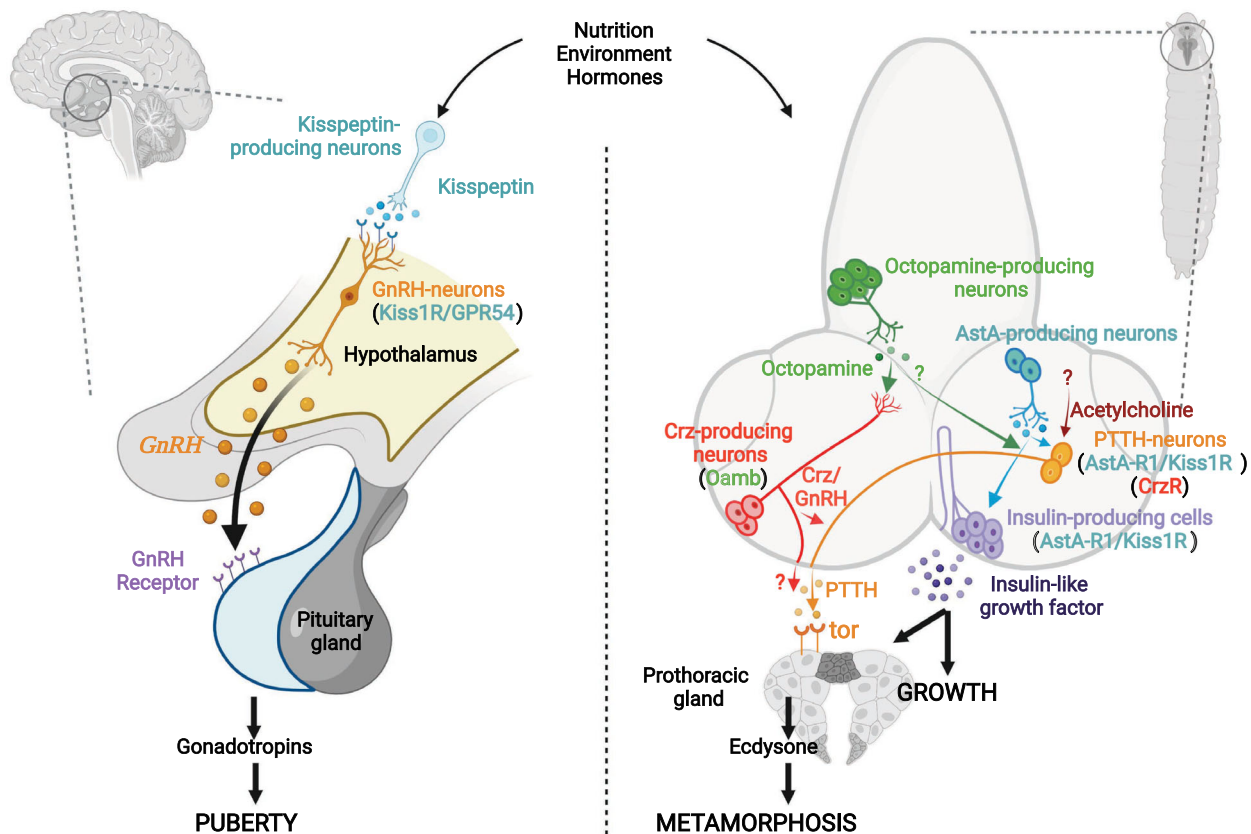


Fig. 1. Neuroendocrine circuits controlling puberty (left) and metamorphosis (right). Note that for simplicity, only one pathway in each *Drosophila* lobe is shown, although these neural circuits are duplicated in each lobe. We have also reversed the orientation of the *Drosophila* larval brain to facilitate comparison with the mammalian brain. AstA, allatostatin A; AstAR1, allatostatin A receptor 1; Crz, corazonin; CrzR, corazonin receptor; GnRH, gonadotropin-releasing hormone; Kiss1, kisspeptin 1; Kiss1R, kisspeptin 1 receptor; Oamb, octopamine receptor in mushroom bodies; PTTH, prothoracicotrophic hormone; and tor, torso.

hypogonadism [12], defective neuroendocrine control of the adult ovarian cycle [13], and obesity [14].

The most potent upstream pubertal signal known to activate pulsatile firing of GnRH neurons is the neuropeptide kisspeptin, a product of the *Kiss1* gene, which activates the G protein-coupled membrane receptor Kiss1R (also known as GPR54) in GnRH neurons in the median eminence [15–18]. Mature kisspeptins in mammals are cleaved, and administration of decapeptide Kp10 (Kiss-10), the minimum active site, can elicit a robust increase in the circulating levels of GnRH [19]. Kisspeptin-positive neurons are widespread in the hypothalamus, mainly in the arcuate nucleus and in the rostral anteroventral periventricular area [20], with a third, less explored, population in the amygdala [21].

Kisspeptin neurons in the arcuate nucleus, named kisspeptin/neurokinin B/dynorphin (KNDy) neurons, also coexpress the tachykinin neurokinin B and the endogenous opioid peptide dynorphin [22,23]. Increased activity of the kisspeptin–Kiss1R signal in response to complex and ill-defined reciprocal positive and inhibitory signals mediated by KNDy neurons correlates with the GnRH pulse generator and the onset of puberty [24]. The kisspeptin neuron population in the anteroventral periventricular area is notably larger in female rodents and is involved in the preovulatory surge of gonadotropins [25]. Importantly, a lack of either kisspeptin or Kiss1R results in absent or delayed puberty onset in animals and hypogonadotropic hypogonadism in humans [26–28]. However, genetic ablation of kisspeptin or Kiss1R neurons using a diphtheria toxin fragment specifically in these cells leads to no change in the timing of the onset of puberty or attainment of fertility [29]. Interestingly, if kisspeptin neurons are ablated in adult mice, fertility is inhibited, suggesting that there is compensation during the formation of reproductive neural circuits that occurs early in development [30].

The onset of puberty is regulated by many permissive factors [31]. For example, in seasonal breeders the photoperiod signals the optimal time of year for the onset of puberty [32]. Among the different pubertal regulators, nutritional and metabolic cues have been shown to play a critical role in the central control of puberty, with numerous studies in rodents and humans indicating that a female's fat reserve must exceed a critical threshold to allow the onset of puberty [33] and thus signal the attainment of sufficient somatic growth to support pregnancy. In fact, the escalating prevalence of child obesity has been blamed for alterations of the age of onset of puberty [34], and malnutrition and intensive physical training can delay puberty [35,36].

In this regard, classical studies in mice [37] and humans [38,39] showed that a deficiency of leptin (a hormone secreted by fat cells) or its receptors (which signal the amount of energy stored in the body) leads to hyperphagia, early-onset obesity, and delayed or complete failure to initiate the pubertal transition. Despite these phenotypes and the fact that leptin modulates the expression of Kisspeptin in the hypothalamus [40], leptin receptors are low or null in Kisspeptin neurons and GnRH neurons [20,41], which supports an indirect mode of action of leptin and other hormonal signals in the regulation of these neuronal populations via mechanisms that are poorly defined. For example, other populations that would play a fundamental role in these processes would be anorexigenic neurons expressing pro-opiomelanocortin and cocaine- and amphetamine-regulated transcript (POMC/CART neurons) and orexigenic neurons expressing neuropeptide Y and agouti-related peptide (NPY/AgRP neurons), which are activated in conditions of an excess and deficit of energy, respectively. NPY and AgRP have been shown to inhibit Kisspeptin neurons [42], whereas POMC neuropeptides (alpha-melanocyte stimulating hormone and CART) have been reported to modulate GnRH neurosecretory activity acting via melanocortin receptors (MC3R and MC4R) [43–45]. In a recent article, Lam *et al.* [46] reported that melanocortin signaling via MC3R also plays a fundamental role in the control of puberty in humans. Humans who carry loss-of-function mutations in MC3R showed delayed puberty accompanied by reductions in linear growth, lean mass and circulating levels of insulin-like growth factor I (IGF1), thus linking conserved nutritional cues to control of puberty [46]. Finally, an alternative to the canonical kisspeptin–HPG pathway involving *de novo* ceramide synthesis at the hypothalamic paraventricular nucleus and ovarian sympathetic innervation has recently been characterized as playing a fundamental role in obesity-induced precocious puberty in female rats [47].

While it is mainly lipid signaling molecules that seem to play a fundamental role in the onset of puberty, other master metabolic hypothalamic sensors, such as the mammalian target of rapamycin (mTOR), AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK) and sirtuin 1 (SIRT1) [48], have also been linked to metabolic/nutritional status and pubertal timing.

For instance, AMPK (a highly conserved serine/threonine kinase that senses glucose and energy status) and SIRT1 (a nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide [NAD⁺]-dependent deacetylase) are activated in conditions of negative energy balance, and both operate in kisspeptin-positive neurons in the arcuate

hypothalamus to delay pubertal timing independently of body weight [49,50]. At least for SIRT1, pubertal timing mechanistically involves epigenetic repression of the puberty-activating gene *Kiss1* [50]. In contrast, mTOR (a second serine/threonine kinase, which detects amino acid availability) is activated in the inverse pattern and has the opposite behavior to those of AMPK and SIRT1, at the time of puberty [51]. Mechanistically, in mouse embryonic fibroblasts, activated AMPK can inhibit mTORC1 by directly phosphorylating the tumor suppressor tuberous sclerosis complex 2 (TSC2) and the critical mTOR complex 1 (mTORC1)-binding subunit, raptor [52]; in addition, glyceraldehyde 3-phosphate dehydrogenase (GAPDH), a glycolytic enzyme, has been shown to be a critical mediator of AMPK-driven SIRT1 activation [53]. Future research will determine the mode of action of these cellular sensors in *Kiss1* cells or in other populations of the GnRH neural network in the control of puberty.

Integration of signals by PTTH neurons in the coordination of growth and metamorphosis

In the larval central brain of *Drosophila melanogaster*, a pair of prothoracicotrophic hormone (PTTH)-releasing neurons located in each hemisphere has long been considered to be the primary promoting factor in the biosynthesis of the hormone ecdysone, the main steroid in insects. These neurons project and secrete PTTH, a neuropeptide initially identified in the silkworm *Bombyx mori* [54], into the prothoracic gland (PG), where they activate the Ras/Raf/ERK (extracellular-signal-regulated kinase) MAP (mitogen-activated protein) kinase pathway via its receptor tyrosine kinase, torso, to promote ecdysone production for regulating larval maturation [55]. *Ptth* gene transcription significantly increases 12 h before pupariation, and genetic ablation of PTTH neurons extends the third instar (L3) larval stage and delays the time to pupariation by 4 or 5 days, with a significant increase in adult body size [56]. A recent study in *Ptth*-null mutants showed only a modest delay of 1 day in the timing of metamorphosis [57], indicating that PTTH cannot be considered as the main promoter of ecdysone synthesis. The existence of one or more additional ecdysteroidogenic signals produced by the PTTH neurons could explain the difference in delay observed in response to PTTH loss compared with PTTH neuron ablation [58].

Recent studies have reported that the timing of PTTH secretion is controlled by different neuropeptides expressed in different larval cell populations

(Fig. 1), including the *Drosophila* kisspeptin homolog allatostatin A (AstA) [59] and GnRH homolog corazonin [60], as well as the neurotransmitters acetylcholine and octopamine [61].

AstA is expressed in a pair of neurons located in the basolateral protocerebrum, and GRASP (green fluorescent protein [GFP] reconstitution across synaptic partners) analysis [62] detected a physical interaction between the axons of AstA neurons and the dendrites of PTTH neurons and insulin-producing cells [59]. AstA receptor 1 (AstAR1) is the insect homolog of mammalian Kiss1R, and its knockdown in PTTH neurons resulted in developmental delay and larger pupae—a phenotype similar to that of *Ptth*-null mutants [57,59].

A second neuropeptide, corazonin, is expressed in three pairs of neurons located in the dorsolateral and dorsomedial protocerebrum [63,64]. GRASP analysis on this cell population detected GFP expression in PTTH neurons and PG cells [60]. Interestingly, ultrastructural studies confirmed this communication and revealed bidirectional connectivity between corazonin and PTTH neurons [60]. In this case, knockdown of the corazonin receptor (CrzR), a member of the GnRH receptor superfamily on PTTH neurons, increased pupal body size without affecting pupariation timing [60].

Classical neurotransmitters that are widespread in the central larval nervous system are also involved in regulating the activity of PTTH neurons in *Drosophila*. In a recent report, Hao *et al.* [61] showed that among neurotransmitters, only acetylcholine and low doses of octopamine increased intracellular Ca^{2+} levels in PTTH neurons. Pharmacological treatment with cadmium chloride, a voltage-dependent Ca^{2+} channel antagonist, abolished octopamine-induced Ca^{2+} responses in the green fluorescent calcium sensor GCaMP6m (medium)-expressing PTTH cells [61], suggesting that low doses of octopamine might modulate the activity of PTTH cells via the G protein-coupled β 3-octopamine receptors (Oct β 3R). Octopamine-mediated signaling, likely occurring at the level of the subesophageal zone, has been shown to regulate corazonin neurons in systemic growth [60]. Genetic analysis performed only on acetylcholine receptors showed that depletion of the α 1 and α 3 subunits of nicotinic receptors, but not muscarinic receptors, reduced the Ca^{2+} responses of PTTH neurons to acetylcholine and also increased pupal body size without affecting pupariation timing [61]; this is a very similar phenotype to that obtained with the neuropeptide corazonin [60]. The lack of effect on pupariation time suggests that corazonin and acetylcholine neurons affect PTTH neurons to promote basal ecdysteroid biosynthesis, but not its peak. Monitoring of GCaMP6s (slow)

activity in PTTH neurons after corazonin neuron activation revealed a strong response only during the mid-L3 larval stage, but not later [60], which would support this hypothesis. In contrast, maximal AstA/AstAR1 activity has been observed toward the end of larval development [59], likely anticipating the rise in PTTH levels and the onset of metamorphosis.

Furthermore, extensive studies have shown that PTTH neurons are under the control of circadian rhythms in the blood-feeding hemipteran *Rhodnius prolixus* [65]. In *Drosophila*, pigment-dispersing factor (PDF)-producing clock neurons contact PTTH neurons, and PDF influences the transcriptional periodicity and attenuates the rise of *Ptth* transcription before pupariation [56] suggesting that circadian rhythms may control PTTH release in *Drosophila* as well. When larvae face tissue damage signals during their development, PTTH neurons and insulin-producing cells

receive inputs from leucine-rich repeat-containing G protein-coupled receptor 3 (Lgr3)-positive neurons [66] to synchronize growth and maturation until the damage is resolved.

PG neurons as a neuroendocrine center in the coordination of growth and metamorphosis: a network of increasing complexity

As the major endocrine organ that dictates pupariation, the PG plays a central role in integrating multiple signals (Fig. 2) that inform the state of growth and maturation to ultimately control secretion from the organ and trigger the juvenile-to-adult transition. These cross talks include autocrine signals generated in the PG itself, which do not involve PTTH neuron activity [58,67,68], and brain-derived [64,69] and

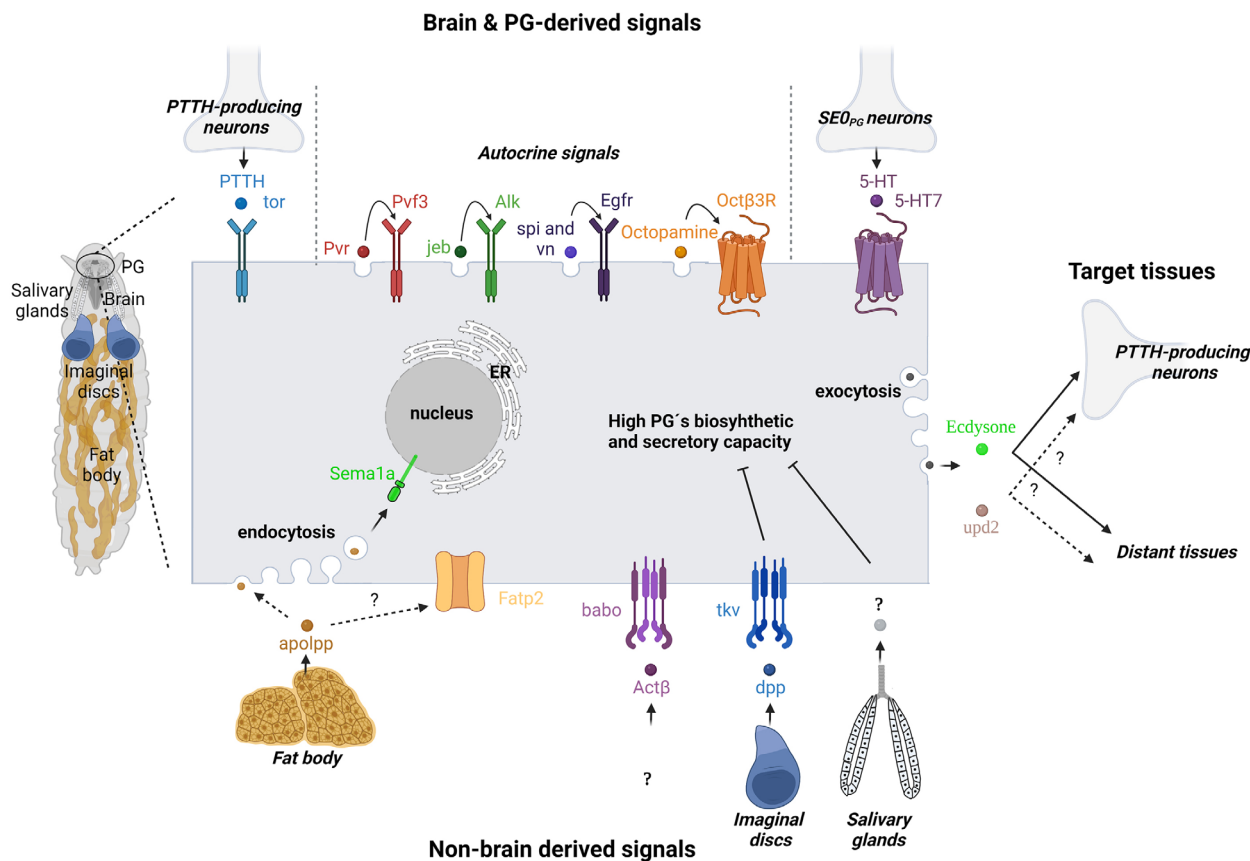


Fig. 2. Scheme of the integration of autocrine, brain- and non-brain-derived signals by the prothoracic gland for the coordination of growth and maturation in *Drosophila*. 5-HT, 5-hydroxytryptamine (serotonin); 5-HT7, 5-hydroxytryptamine (serotonin) receptor 7; Act β , activin- β ; Alk, anaplastic lymphoma kinase; apolpp, apolipoprotein; babo, baboon; dpp, decapentaplegic; Ec, ecdysone; Egfr, epidermal growth factor receptor; ER, endoplasmic reticulum; Fatp2, fatty acid transport protein 2a; jeb, jelly belly; Oct β 3R, octopamine β 3 receptor; PTTH, prothoracicotropic hormone; Pvrf3, PDGF- and VEGF-related factor 3; PG, prothoracic gland; Pvr, PDGF- and VEGF-receptor related; tkv, thickveins; Sema1a, semaphorin1a; spi, spitz; tor, torso; upd2, unpaired 2; and vn, vein.

non-brain-derived signals [70–73] from organs that convey nutritional status, environmental development and other unknown inputs that directly impact the PG.

Autocrine signals primarily include multiple receptor tyrosine kinases (anaplastic lymphoma kinase [Alk], PDGF- and VEGF-receptor related [Pvr], and epidermal growth factor receptor [EGFR]) that, together with PTH/torso, seem to share the same signaling pathway to control pupation through Ras/ERK activation [58]. Why is there this redundancy of receptor tyrosine kinase signaling in the PG? Different explanations have been proposed: (a) to confer robustness and flexibility in response to changing developmental conditions, (b) to act synchronously or sequentially and achieve Ras/ERK activation that is strong enough to drive the massive PG secretion necessary for carrying out pupation or (c) to induce other unidentified downstream signaling pathways in addition to Ras/ERK signaling [58]. Although receptor tyrosine kinase activation is the predominant signaling in the PG, activation by monoaminergic autocrine signaling through the G protein-coupled octopamine- β 3 receptor (Oct β 3R) has also been reported to act upstream of insulin/insulin-like growth factor (IIS) ligand family and Ras/ERK signaling [68]. A second G protein-coupled receptor in the PG, 5-hydroxytryptamine receptor 7 (5-HT7), responds to food-related signals from a subset of stomatogastric serotonergic (SE0_{PG}) neurons that directly innervate the PG [69]. In conditions of nutrient scarcity, the projections of SE0_{PG} neurons are reduced [69], leading to decreased 5-HT signaling to PG cells and, as a result, reduced ecdysone release and delayed development, likely due to defective translation in those cells [74].

Multiple inputs from non-cerebral organs seem capable of influencing pupariation through diffusible signals reaching the PG (Fig. 2). Unlike the signaling of tissue damage mediated by the positive regulation of insulin-like peptide 8 [66,75], under normal physiological conditions, decapentaplegic (Dpp), a ligand of the transforming growth factor- β (TGF- β) signaling pathway, is released from the imaginal disks to the hemolymph and its signaling via the thickveins (Tkv) receptor also negatively regulates the production of ecdysone [72]. Activin, another TGF- β ligand, the source of which is unknown, functions in this process in the PG antagonistically to Dpp signaling [71]. Although the mode of integration of these pathways is not well defined, the hypothesis predicts that Dpp signaling must be reduced in the PG to allow pupariation to proceed. A recent study has shown that the salivary gland-derived peptide Sgsf is secreted into the

hemolymph to regulate systemic growth via the IIS/target of rapamycin (TOR) signaling pathway without affecting metamorphic timing [73]. Interestingly, ablation of the salivary glands is necessary to control metamorphic timing, which also suggests the existence of one or more additional signals produced by salivary gland cells through mechanisms that are still unknown.

Despite this cross talk of multiple pathways converging on the PG, it remains to be clarified how these triggers of ecdysone biosynthesis affect cholesterol trafficking [76–78] and the transcription and chromatin remodeling of *Halloween* ecdysteroid biosynthetic genes [79,80] for timing ecdysone production in response to these stimulus-triggered signaling pathways. Although 20 ecdysteroidogenic transcription factors have been identified to date, we still do not fully understand their mechanism of action and whether it is direct or indirect, or their mode of interaction in the expression of *Halloween* genes. There is evidence that the transcription of *Halloween* genes is directly inhibited by epigenetic control, via the nuclear receptors methoprene-tolerant (Met) and germ cell-expressed (Gce) via Krüppel homolog 1 (Kr-h1) [81,82].

It is also unclear whether communication between the fat body, the larval fat and energetic reservoir, and the PG (either directly or indirectly via PTH neurons) informs that adequate overall reserves of energy or specific nutrients/metabolites have been reached to meet the demands of subsequent reproduction and thus allow pupariation. If this were so, it would mean that despite the evolutionary distance, the process of metamorphosis is governed by principles more similar to puberty than we might think. We also mostly do not know what cellular processes occur at the level of the PG once the larva has passed the critical weight, leading to the production and secretion of ecdysone [83].

We have recently described that inhibiting lipid transport from the fat body via knockdown of *apolipoprotein* (*apolpp*), or in the PG via knockdown of *Fatty acid transport protein 2* (*Fatp2*), *Semaphorin1a* (*Sema1a*) and leptin-like *unpaired 2* (*upd2*), precludes the transition through the critical weight without measurable impairment in the IIS signaling pathway and results in larvae that never left the food and continued growing and gaining weight until death [70]; these effects are analogous to those of leptin/LepR loss in patients and mice. Silencing of cationic amino acid and sugar transporters had no effect. These results support a critical role of lipid signaling, transport, and sensing in the events leading to sexual maturation commitment. Validating our conclusion, expression of the human leptin transgene in the PG rescued both the

obese and non-pupating phenotypes of *upd2*-mutant and *Semala*-mutant animals, suggesting that a fat sensor mechanism similar to the leptin system in mammals may act in the larval PG to coordinate body weight and growth for pupariation. Supporting the involvement of lipids in sexual maturation, a recent study has shown that enhancing cholesterol signaling in PG cells, a substrate for ecdysone production, leads to increased body growth and premature pupariation [84].

Interestingly, *Semala*¹ PGs are distinctly different from PGs with knockdown in the IIS/TOR pathway: we did not detect any alteration in the size or endoreplication of the *Semala*¹ PG cells, a feature previously linked to ecdysone synthesis [85]. Neither IIS/TOR nor PTTH/torso/Ras activation corrected larval arrest and obesity caused by *Semala* depletion in PG cells [70]. Our finding that TOR activation cannot rescue *Semala* deficiency in the PG suggests either that nutrient sensing by TOR is upstream of *Semala* or that *Semala*-mediated events may provide competence for responding to TOR. We favor this second possibility.

Analysis of the metabolic status of *Drosophila* larvae using an optimized NMR profiling assay and other commercial assays in dissected tissues and whole animals [86] showed elevated levels of sugar and lipids accumulated during the extension of feeding behavior [70]. Together with this metabolic analysis, we used super-resolution imaging of the PG to determine that the high secretory competence of the PG requires endocytosis, endoplasmic reticulum remodeling and ribosomal maturation for the acquisition of the high biosynthetic and secretory capacity of the PG cells; all these processes are *Semala*-dependent. Interestingly, we found that nanobody-based retention of *upd2*::GFP in the nuclei of PG cells led to a non-pupating and massively obese phenotype that was indistinguishable from the phenotype resulting from the knockdown of *upd2* in PG cells [70]. In the brain and peripheral organs, fat body cells and imaginal disks respond to *upd2* and ecdysone to initiate nutrient-independent growth, differentiation, and maturation [70,87–89].

Conclusions

Recent studies of mammalian puberty and insect metamorphosis have shown that, despite their evolutionary distance and physiological differences, these critical events exhibit similar design principles and conservation of the molecular components involved. A variety of environmental and internal cues (e.g., nutrition,

photoperiod, temperature, and tissue damage) appear capable of influencing sexual maturation through the activation of neuroendocrine organs, culminating in steroid production and secretion. Among these signals, the communication between peripheral body fat levels and endocrine organs seems crucial and allows the assessment of nutrient availability and the growth status of internal organs, ensuring that maturation starts at the right time. This is extremely concerning given the current rampant prevalence of childhood obesity and its possible relationship with the increasing incidence of early puberty [34], which affects growth and final body size, and which is associated with a number of adult morbidities [90–92].

Holistic investigation through the combined use of model organisms is certainly necessary to identify upstream signals (lipids, amino acids, etc.) and their sensors in the brain, as well as how these signals are integrated in the control of metamorphosis and puberty.

Acknowledgements

Figures were created with [BioRender.com](https://www.biorender.com). This work was supported by grants BFU2016-76295-R and SEV-2017-0723 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by ERDF ‘A way of making Europe,’ a CSIC Grant (2019AEP181), and a Generalitat Valenciana Grant (PROMETEU/2021/027) to JM; and by grant BES-2017-081122 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by ESF ‘Investing in your future’ to JC-V.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Author contributions

JM, JG, and JC-V involved in writing—original draft; JM, JG, and JC-V contributed to review and editing; JM contributed to funding acquisition.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

References

- 1 Parent AS, Teilmann G, Juul A, Skakkebaek NE, Toppari J, Bourguignon JP. The timing of normal puberty and the age limits of sexual precocity: variations around the world, secular trends, and changes after migration. *Endocr Rev.* 2003;24:668–93.

- 2 Plant TM. Neuroendocrine control of the onset of puberty. *Front Neuroendocrinol.* 2015;**38**:73–88.
- 3 Pan X, O'Connor MB. Developmental maturation: *Drosophila* AstA signaling provides a kiss to grow up. *Curr Biol.* 2019;**29**:R161–4.
- 4 Herbison AE. Control of puberty onset and fertility by gonadotropin-releasing hormone neurons. *Nat Rev Endocrinol.* 2016;**12**:452–66.
- 5 Wang L, Guo W, Shen X, Yeo S, Long H, Wang Z, et al. Different dendritic domains of the GnRH neuron underlie the pulse and surge modes of GnRH secretion in female mice. *eLife.* 2020;**9**:e53945.
- 6 Casoni F, Malone SA, Belle M, Luzzati F, Collier F, Allet C, et al. Development of the neurons controlling fertility in humans: new insights from 3D imaging and transparent fetal brains. *Development.* 2016;**143**:3969–81.
- 7 Clasadonte J, Prevot V. The special relationship: glia–neuron interactions in the neuroendocrine hypothalamus. *Nat Rev Endocrinol.* 2018;**14**:25–44.
- 8 Pellegrino G, Martin M, Allet C, Lhomme T, Geller S, Franssen D, et al. GnRH neurons recruit astrocytes in infancy to facilitate network integration and sexual maturation. *Nat Neurosci.* 2021;**24**:1660–72.
- 9 Lopez-Rodriguez D, Franssen D, Bakker J, Lomniczi A, Parent A-S. Cellular and molecular features of EDC exposure: consequences for the GnRH network. *Nat Rev Endocrinol.* 2021;**17**:83–96.
- 10 Sykiotis GP, Pitteloud N, Seminara SB, Kaiser UB, Crowley WF Jr. Deciphering genetic disease in the genomic era: the model of GnRH deficiency. *Sci Transl Med.* 2010;**2**:32rv2.
- 11 Giacobini P. Shaping the reproductive system: role of Semaphorins in gonadotropin-releasing hormone development and function. *Neuroendocrinology.* 2015;**102**:200–15.
- 12 Cariboni A, André V, Chauvet S, Cassatella D, Davidson K, Caramello A, et al. Dysfunctional SEMA3E signaling underlies gonadotropin-releasing hormone neuron deficiency in Kallmann syndrome. *J Clin Invest.* 2015;**125**:2413–28.
- 13 Giacobini P, Parkash J, Campagne C, Messina A, Casoni F, Vanacker C, et al. Brain endothelial cells control fertility through ovarian-steroid-dependent release of semaphorin 3A. *PLoS Biol.* 2014;**12**:e1001808.
- 14 Van der Klaauw AA, Croizier S, Mendes de Oliveira E, Stadler LKJ, Park S, Kong Y, et al. Human Semaphorin 3 variants link melanocortin circuit development and energy balance. *Cell.* 2019;**176**:729–42.e18.
- 15 Kirilov M, Clarkson J, Liu X, Roa J, Campos P, Porteous R, et al. Dependence of fertility on kisspeptin-Gpr54 signaling at the GnRH neuron. *Nat Commun.* 2013;**4**:2492.
- 16 Sobrino V, Avendaño MS, Perdices-López C, Jimenez-Puyer M, Tena-Sempere M. Kisspeptins and the neuroendocrine control of reproduction: recent progress and new frontiers in kisspeptin research. *Front Neuroendocrinol.* 2022;**65**:100977.
- 17 Plant TM. The neurobiological mechanism underlying hypothalamic GnRH pulse generation: the role of kisspeptin neurons in the arcuate nucleus. *F1000Res.* 2019;**8**:F1000 faculty Rev-982.
- 18 Clarkson J, Han SY, Piet R, McLennan T, Kane GM, Ng J, et al. Definition of the hypothalamic GnRH pulse generator in mice. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA.* 2017;**114**:E10216–23.
- 19 Messenger S, Chatzidaki EE, Ma D, Hendrick AG, Zahn D, Dixon J, et al. Kisspeptin directly stimulates gonadotropin-releasing hormone release via G protein-coupled receptor 54. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA.* 2005;**102**:1761–6.
- 20 Cravo RM, Margatho LO, Osborne-Lawrence S, Donato J Jr, Atkin S, Bookout AL, et al. Characterization of Kiss1 neurons using transgenic mouse models. *Neuroscience.* 2011;**173**:37–56.
- 21 Pineda R, Plaisier F, Millar RP, Ludwig M. Amygdala Kisspeptin neurons: putative mediators of olfactory control of the gonadotropic Axis. *Neuroendocrinology.* 2017;**104**:223–38.
- 22 Goodman RL, Lehman MN, Smith JT, Coolen LM, de Oliveira CV, Jafarzadehshirazi MR, et al. Kisspeptin neurons in the arcuate nucleus of the ewe express both dynorphin a and neurokinin B. *Endocrinology.* 2007;**148**:5752–60.
- 23 Moore AM, Coolen LM, Porter DT, Goodman RL, Lehman MN. KNDy cells revisited. *Endocrinology.* 2018;**159**:3219–34.
- 24 Nagae M, Uenoyama Y, Okamoto S, Tsuchida H, Ikegami K, Goto T, et al. Direct evidence that KNDy neurons maintain gonadotropin pulses and folliculogenesis as the GnRH pulse generator. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA.* 2021;**118**:e2009156118.
- 25 Khan AR, Kauffman AS. The role of kisspeptin and RFamide-related peptide-3 neurones in the circadian-timed preovulatory luteinising hormone surge. *J Neuroendocrinol.* 2012;**24**:131–43.
- 26 de Roux N, Genin E, Carel J-C, Matsuda F, Chaussain J-L, Milgrom E. Hypogonadotropic hypogonadism due to loss of function of the Kiss1-derived peptide receptor GPR54. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA.* 2003;**100**:10972–6.
- 27 Seminara SB, Messenger S, Chatzidaki EE, Thresher RR, Acierno JS, Shagoury JK, et al. The GPR54 Gene as a regulator of puberty. *N Engl J Med.* 2003;**349**:1614–27.
- 28 d'Anglemont de Tassigny X, Fagg LA, Dixon JP, Day K, Leitch HG, Hendrick AG, et al. Hypogonadotropic hypogonadism in mice lacking a functional Kiss1 gene. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA.* 2007;**104**:10714–9.

- 29 Mayer C, Boehm U. Female reproductive maturation in the absence of kisspeptin/GPR54 signaling. *Nat Neurosci.* 2011;**14**:704–10.
- 30 Kumar D, Boehm U. Genetic dissection of puberty in mice. *Exp Physiol.* 2013;**98**:1528–34.
- 31 Sisk CL, Foster DL. The neural basis of puberty and adolescence. *Nat Neurosci.* 2004;**7**:1040–7.
- 32 Chakradhar S. Animals on the verge: what different species can teach us about human puberty. *Nat Med.* 2018;**24**:114–7.
- 33 Frisch RE, Revelle R. Height and weight at menarche and a hypothesis of critical body weights and adolescent events. *Science.* 1970;**169**:397–9.
- 34 Reinehr T, Roth CL. Is there a causal relationship between obesity and puberty? *Lancet Child Adolesc Health.* 2019;**3**:44–54.
- 35 Sedlmeyer IL, Palmert MR. Delayed puberty: analysis of a large case series from an academic center. *J Clin Endocrinol Metab.* 2002;**87**:1613–20.
- 36 Georgopoulos NA, Roupas ND, Theodoropoulou A, Tsekouras A, Vagenakis AG, Markou KB. The influence of intensive physical training on growth and pubertal development in athletes. *Ann N Y Acad Sci.* 2010;**1205**:39–44.
- 37 Zhang Y, Proenca R, Maffei M, Barone M, Leopold L, Friedman JM. Positional cloning of the mouse obese gene and its human homologue. *Nature.* 1994;**372**:425–32.
- 38 Clement K, Vaisse C, Lahlou N, Cabrol S, Pelloux V, Cassuto D, et al. A mutation in the human leptin receptor gene causes obesity and pituitary dysfunction. *Nature.* 1998;**392**:398–401.
- 39 Montague CT, Farooqi IS, Whitehead JP, Soos MA, Rau H, Wareham NJ, et al. Congenital leptin deficiency is associated with severe early-onset obesity in humans. *Nature.* 1997;**387**:903–8.
- 40 Navarro VM, Tena-Sempere M. Neuroendocrine control by kisspeptins: role in metabolic regulation of fertility. *Nat Rev Endocrinol.* 2012;**8**:40–53.
- 41 Louis GW, Greenwald-Yarnell M, Phillips R, Coolen LM, Lehman MN, Myers MG Jr. Molecular mapping of the neural pathways linking leptin to the neuroendocrine reproductive axis. *Endocrinology.* 2011;**152**:2302–10.
- 42 Padilla SL, Qiu J, Nestor CC, Zhang C, Smith AW, Whiddon BB, et al. AgRP to Kiss1 neuron signaling links nutritional state and fertility. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA.* 2017;**114**:2413–8.
- 43 Manfredi-Lozano M, Roa J, Ruiz-Pino F, Piet R, Garcia-Galiano D, Pineda R, et al. Defining a novel leptin–melanocortin–kisspeptin pathway involved in the metabolic control of puberty. *Mol Metab.* 2016;**5**:844–57.
- 44 True C, Verma S, Grove KL, Smith MS. Cocaine- and amphetamine-regulated transcript is a potent stimulator of GnRH and Kisspeptin cells and may contribute to negative energy balance-induced reproductive inhibition in females. *Endocrinology.* 2013;**154**:2821–32.
- 45 Manfredi-Lozano M, Roa J, Tena-Sempere M. Connecting metabolism and gonadal function: novel central neuropeptide pathways involved in the metabolic control of puberty and fertility. *Front Neuroendocrinol.* 2018;**48**:37–49.
- 46 Lam BYH, Williamson A, Finer S, Day FR, Tadross JA, Gonçalves Soares A, et al. MC3R links nutritional state to childhood growth and the timing of puberty. *Nature.* 2021;**599**:436–41.
- 47 Heras V, Castellano JM, Fernandois D, Velasco I, Rodríguez-Vazquez E, Roa J, et al. Central ceramide signaling mediates obesity-induced precocious puberty. *Cell Metab.* 2020;**32**:951–66.e8.
- 48 Wang Y-P, Lei Q-Y. Metabolite sensing and signaling in cell metabolism. *Signal Transduct Target Ther.* 2018;**3**:30.
- 49 Roa J, Barroso A, Ruiz-Pino F, Vázquez MJ, Seoane-Collazo P, Martínez-Sánchez N, et al. Metabolic regulation of female puberty via hypothalamic AMPK–kisspeptin signaling. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA.* 2018;**115**:E10758–67.
- 50 Vazquez MJ, Toro CA, Castellano JM, Ruiz-Pino F, Roa J, Beiroa D, et al. SIRT1 mediates obesity- and nutrient-dependent perturbation of pubertal timing by epigenetically controlling Kiss1 expression. *Nat Commun.* 2018;**9**:4194.
- 51 Roa J, Garcia-Galiano D, Varela L, Sánchez-Garrido MA, Pineda R, Castellano JM, et al. The mammalian target of rapamycin as novel central regulator of puberty onset via modulation of hypothalamic Kiss1 system. *Endocrinology.* 2009;**150**:5016–26.
- 52 Gwinn DM, Shackelford DB, Egan DF, Mihaylova MM, Mery A, Vasquez DS, et al. AMPK phosphorylation of raptor mediates a metabolic checkpoint. *Mol Cell.* 2008;**30**:214–26.
- 53 Chang C, Su H, Zhang D, Wang Y, Shen Q, Liu B, et al. AMPK-dependent phosphorylation of GAPDH triggers Sirt1 activation and is necessary for autophagy upon glucose starvation. *Mol Cell.* 2015;**60**:930–40.
- 54 Kawakami A, Kataoka H, Oka T, Mizoguchi A, Kimura-Kawakami M, Adachi T, et al. Molecular cloning of the *Bombyx mori* prothoracicotropic hormone. *Science.* 1990;**247**:1333–5.
- 55 Rewitz KF, Yamanaka N, Gilbert LI, O'Connor MB. The insect neuropeptide PTTH activates receptor tyrosine kinase torso to initiate metamorphosis. *Science.* 2009;**326**:1403–5.
- 56 McBrayer Z, Ono H, Shimell M, Parvy JP, Beckstead RB, Warren JT, et al. Prothoracicotropic hormone regulates developmental timing and body size in *Drosophila*. *Dev Cell.* 2007;**13**:857–71.
- 57 Shimell M, Pan X, Martin FA, Ghosh AC, Leopold P, O'Connor MB, et al. Prothoracicotropic hormone

- modulates environmental adaptive plasticity through the control of developmental timing. *Development*. 2018;**145**:dev159699.
- 58 Pan X, O'Connor MB. Coordination among multiple receptor tyrosine kinase signals controls *Drosophila* developmental timing and body size. *Cell Rep*. 2021;**36**:109644.
- 59 Deveci D, Martin FA, Leopold P, Romero NM. AstA signaling functions as an evolutionary conserved mechanism timing juvenile to adult transition. *Curr Biol*. 2019;**29**:813–22.e4.
- 60 Imura E, Shimada-Niwa Y, Nishimura T, Huckesfeld S, Schlegel P, Ohhara Y, et al. The Corazonin-PTTH neuronal Axis controls systemic body growth by regulating basal Ecdysteroid biosynthesis in *Drosophila melanogaster*. *Curr Biol*. 2020;**30**:2156–65.e5.
- 61 Hao S, Gestrich JY, Zhang X, Xu M, Wang X, Liu L, et al. Neurotransmitters affect larval development by regulating the activity of prothoracicotropic hormone-releasing neurons in *Drosophila melanogaster*. *Front Neurosci*. 2021;**15**:653858.
- 62 Feinberg EH, Vanhoven MK, Bendesky A, Wang G, Fetter RD, Shen K, et al. GFP reconstitution across synaptic partners (GRASP) defines cell contacts and synapses in living nervous systems. *Neuron*. 2008;**57**:353–63.
- 63 Choi YJ, Lee G, Hall JC, Park JH. Comparative analysis of Corazonin-encoding genes (Crz's) in *Drosophila* species and functional insights into Crz-expressing neurons. *J Comp Neurol*. 2005;**482**:372–85.
- 64 Hückesfeld S, Schlegel P, Miroschnikow A, Schoofs A, Zinke I, Haubrich AN, et al. Unveiling the sensory and interneuronal pathways of the neuroendocrine connectome in *Drosophila*. *Elife*. 2021;**10**:e65745.
- 65 Steel CG, Vafopoulou X. Circadian orchestration of developmental hormones in the insect, *Rhodnius prolixus*. *Comp Biochem Physiol A Mol Integr Physiol*. 2006;**144**:351–64.
- 66 Vallejo DM, Juarez-Carreño S, Bolivar J, Morante J, Dominguez M. A brain circuit that synchronizes growth and maturation revealed through Dilp8 binding to Lgr3. *Science*. 2015;**350**:aac6767.
- 67 Cruz J, Martín D, Franch-Marro X. Egfr signaling is a major regulator of ecdysone biosynthesis in the *Drosophila* prothoracic gland. *Curr Biol*. 2020;**30**:1547–54.e4.
- 68 Ohhara Y, Shimada-Niwa Y, Niwa R, Kayashima Y, Hayashi Y, Akagi K, et al. Autocrine regulation of ecdysone synthesis by beta3-octopamine receptor in the prothoracic gland is essential for *Drosophila* metamorphosis. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA*. 2015;**112**:1452–7.
- 69 Shimada-Niwa Y, Niwa R. Serotonergic neurons respond to nutrients and regulate the timing of steroid hormone biosynthesis in *Drosophila*. *Nat Commun*. 2014;**5**:5778.
- 70 Juarez-Carreño S, Vallejo DM, Carranza-Valencia J, Palomino-Schätzlein M, Ramon-Cañellas P, Santoro R, et al. Body-fat sensor triggers ribosome maturation in the steroidogenic gland to initiate sexual maturation in *Drosophila*. *Cell Rep*. 2021;**37**:109830.
- 71 Gibbens YY, Warren JT, Gilbert LI, O'Connor MB. Neuroendocrine regulation of *Drosophila* metamorphosis requires TGFbeta/activin signaling. *Development*. 2011;**138**:2693–703.
- 72 Setiawan L, Pan X, Woods AL, O'Connor MB, Hariharan IK. The BMP2/4 ortholog Dpp can function as an inter-organ signal that regulates developmental timing. *Life Sci Alliance*. 2018;**1**:e201800216.
- 73 Li Z, Qian W, Song W, Zhao T, Yang Y, Wang W, et al. A salivary gland-secreted peptide regulates insect systemic growth. *Cell Rep*. 2022;**38**:110397.
- 74 Deliu LP, Jadir D, Ghosh A, Grewal SS. Serotonergic neuron ribosomes regulate the neuroendocrine control of *Drosophila* development. *bioRxiv*. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2021.06.10.447971>
- 75 Garelli A, Gontijo AM, Miguela V, Caparros E, Dominguez M. Imaginal discs secrete insulin-like peptide 8 to mediate plasticity of growth and maturation. *Science*. 2012;**336**:579–82.
- 76 Texada MJ, Malita A, Christensen CF, Dall KB, Faergeman NJ, Nagy S, et al. Autophagy-mediated cholesterol trafficking controls steroid production. *Dev Cell*. 2019;**48**:659–71.e4.
- 77 Pan X, Neufeld TP, O'Connor MB. A tissue- and temporal-specific autophagic switch controls *Drosophila* pre-metamorphic nutritional checkpoints. *Curr Biol*. 2019;**29**:2840–51.e4.
- 78 Danielsen ET, Moeller ME, Yamanaka N, Ou Q, Laursen JM, Soenderholm C, et al. A *Drosophila* genome-wide screen identifies regulators of steroid hormone production and developmental timing. *Dev Cell*. 2016;**37**:558–70.
- 79 Kamiyama T, Niwa R. Transcriptional regulators of Ecdysteroid biosynthetic enzymes and their roles in insect development. *Front Physiol*. 2022;**13**:823418.
- 80 Drelon C, Rogers MF, Belalcazar HM, Secombe J. The histone demethylase KDM5 controls developmental timing in *Drosophila* by promoting prothoracic gland endocycles. *Development*. 2019;**146**:dev182568.
- 81 Liu S, Li K, Gao Y, Liu X, Chen W, Ge W, et al. Antagonistic actions of juvenile hormone and 20-hydroxyecdysone within the ring gland determine developmental transitions in *Drosophila*. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA*. 2018;**115**:139–44.
- 82 Zhang T, Song W, Li Z, Qian W, Wei L, Yang Y, et al. Krüppel homolog 1 represses insect ecdysone biosynthesis by directly inhibiting the transcription of steroidogenic enzymes. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA*. 2018;**115**:3960–5.

- 83 Pan X, Connacher RP, O'Connor MB. Control of the insect metamorphic transition by ecdysteroid production and secretion. *Curr Opin Insect Sci.* 2021;**43**:11–20.
- 84 Texada MJ, Lassen M, Pedersen LH, Koyama T, Malita A, Rewitz K. Insulin signaling couples growth and early maturation to cholesterol intake in *Drosophila*. *Curr Biol.* 2022;**32**:1548–62.e6.
- 85 Ohhara Y, Kobayashi S, Yamanaka N. Nutrient-dependent endocycling in steroidogenic tissue dictates timing of metamorphosis in *Drosophila melanogaster*. *PLoS Genet.* 2017;**13**:e1006583.
- 86 Palomino-Schätzlein M, Carranza-Valencia J, Guirado J, Juárez-Carreño S, Morante J. A toolbox to study metabolic status of *Drosophila melanogaster* larvae. *STAR Protoc.* 2022;**3**:101195.
- 87 Christensen CF, Koyama T, Nagy S, Danielsen ET, Texada MJ, Halberg KA, et al. Ecdysone-dependent feedback regulation of prothoracicotropic hormone controls the timing of developmental maturation. *Development.* 2020;**147**:dev188110.
- 88 Okamoto N, Viswanatha R, Bittar R, Li Z, Haga-Yamanaka S, Perrimon N, et al. A membrane transporter is required for steroid hormone uptake in *Drosophila*. *Dev Cell.* 2018;**47**:294–305.e7.
- 89 Okamoto N, Yamanaka N. Steroid hormone entry into the brain requires a membrane transporter in *Drosophila*. *Curr Biol.* 2020;**30**:359–66.e3.
- 90 Cheng TS, Day FR, Lakshman R, Ong KK. Association of puberty timing with type 2 diabetes: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *PLoS Med.* 2020;**17**:e1003017.
- 91 Day FR, Thompson DJ, Helgason H, Chasman DI, Finucane H, Sulem P, et al. Genomic analyses identify hundreds of variants associated with age at menarche and support a role for puberty timing in cancer risk. *Nat Genet.* 2017;**49**:834–41.
- 92 Day FR, Elks CE, Murray A, Ong KK, Perry JRB. Puberty timing associated with diabetes, cardiovascular disease and also diverse health outcomes in men and women: the UKbiobank study. *Sci Rep.* 2015;**5**:11208.