Syndecan as a Messenger to Link Diabetes and Cancer

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Abstract

Syndecans are membrane-anchored proteoglycans and implicated in the pathogenesis of cancer progression and metastasis. Syndecans also play important roles in interacting with growth factors, extracellular matrix and other cell surface molecules such as IGF-1 receptor. In the present review, we discuss about the syndecan structure, their role in signaling with other receptors, in addition to its general biology. The emerging roles of syndecans in the pathophysiology of human diseases, especially insulin resistance, diabetes and cancer is discussed.

Key Words: Syndecans, Insulin resistance, Diabetes and cancer

INTRODUCTION

Cell surface syndecans are membrane-anchored proteoglycans. These glycoproteins have covalently linked glycosaminoglycan side chains. They interact via their extracellular part with various growth factors, extracellular matrix components, other cell surface molecules, and proteins involved in the regulation of blood coagulation. Thus the syndecans involve in synchronized expression patterns during embryogenesis and malignant transformation. These cell-cell interactions via their extracellular matrix ligands control cell proliferation, dynamic cytoskeletal remodeling, apoptosis and gene expression.

Over the last few years, it has been widely accepted that heparan sulfate proteoglycans play a role in growth control, cell spreading, cellular recognition, cellular adhesion, and signaling, possibly as co-receptors with integrins, IGF-1R and cell-cell adhesion molecules, including fibronectin, vitronectin, laminins, and the fibrillar collagens (Bernfield et al., 1999; Woods, 2001; Alexopoulou et al., 2007; Beauvais and Rapraeger, 2010). In addition, all syndecans have dibasic peptide sequence adjacent to the plasma membrane. Thus, the extracellular domains of syndecans could be cleaved by extracellular proteases. Syndecan’s ectodomains have been shown to regulate a multitude of biological functions in cell-dependent and cell-independent approaches (Li et al., 2002; Endo et al., 2003; Elenius et al., 2004). Soluble syndecans also convert the membrane-bound receptors into soluble effectors or antagonists. The soluble ectodomains of syndecans can compete with intact syndecans for extracellular ligands (Steinfeld et al., 1998). In this review, we will discuss the general features and their conventional roles in signaling with co-receptors. Finally, we will explore the emerging roles of syndecans in the pathophysiology of human diseases, especially type 2 diabetes.

SYNDECAN STRUCTURE

All the syndecans are a type 1 transmembrane proteins that are expressed in almost every cell of the body. Four members of syndecan family have been identified in mammalians such as syndecan-1, 2, 3, and 4. Syndecan-1 analogs are also identified in other mammals such as mouse, rat, dog, chimpanzee, guinea pig, Chinese hamster, cat and chicken. The extracellular domains of human and mouse syndecan-1 display approximately 70% sequence homology whereas the transmembrane domain and cytoplasmic domain show 96% and 100% sequence homology, respectively. Synthesis of four syndecan core proteins are mediated by 4 distinct cDNAs (Couchman, 2003).

The core protein contains 3 domains, an ectodomain (extracellular domain), transmembrane domain, and cytoplasmic domain. The ectodomain contains a cleavable amino terminal single peptide and the glycosaminoglycan attachment sites. There are 3 highly conserved serine-glycine sites for heparan sulfate attachment (amino acids 37, 45 and 47) near the N terminal of the core protein and 2 highly conserved serine-glycine sites for chondroitin sulfate attachment (amino acids 210 and 220), adjacent to the cell membrane. Protease cleavage sites contain basic amino acids and they are located to...
the transmembrane portion of the protein core. The cleavage sites are related to shedding of the proteoglycan. The transmembrane domains are highly conserved among the syndecan family members from different species, since only a few amino acids differ among the vertebrate sequence. These domains contain a unique sequence of glycine/alanine that is involved in interactions with other membrane proteins and for their membrane localization.

The cytoplasmic carboxyl-terminal is contains 2 highly conserved regions with about 30 amino acids, which are same in all syndecan family members. However, syndecan-2 has a substitution of arginine for lysine. The C1 region at juxtaprotein core region has been suggested to play an important role in binding protein FERM domains. The C1 region is well conserved among the syndecan family except a conservative R for K amino acid substitution in syndecan-3 (Cohen et al., 1998; Granes et al., 2000). The C2 region located at carboxyl terminal bearing the amino acid sequence of EFYA is present in all syndecan family members and has the ability to bind with type II PDZ domain which is important in protein-protein interactions. It binds specifically to the carboxyl termini of various transmembrane receptors, and rearranging cell membrane-associated proteins (Fanning and Anderson 1996; Songyang et al., 1997). Interestingly, PDZ domain-containing proteins associate with many signaling proteins, including syntentin, cortactin, and calcium/calmodulin dependent serine protein kinase (CASK) (Grootjans et al., 1997; Gao et al., 2000; Ethell et al., 2000). A central variable region (V) is located between C1 and C2 that differs in each family member. The sequence of variable domain (V) for syndecan-1 is SLEEPKOANGGAY-QKPTKQE. The cytoplasmic domain is important in interacting with cytoskeletal proteins. A tyrosine residue on the cytoplasmic domain is essential in the interaction. The V region plays critical role in bundle of actin as well as cell migration. Fig. 1 displays that a general feature of structures of syndecans.

Each syndecan family member has a unique pattern of expression in terms of time and space. Syndecan-1 is primarily expressed in epithelial and plasma cells; Syndecan-2 is mainly expressed in fibroblasts, endothelial cells, neurons, and smooth muscle cells; Syndecan-3 is the major syndecan in the nervous system, but it is also important for chondrocyte proliferation; and syndeca-4 is nearly ubiquitous. Recent study suggested that both sydenca-2 and syndecan-4 exert important role in osteoblast cell adhesion and survival (Wang et al., 2011). Interestingly, syndecan-1 has been suggested to play a role I gingival inflammation (Kotsovill et al., 2010).

**INSULIN RESISTANCE AND CANCER**

In past several years, there have been a number of interesting research publications showing that the association between the cancer risk and the different components of metabolic syndrome. However, the epidemiological studies linking metabolic syndrome to cancer are scarce. Adiposity induces adverse local and systemic effects that include adipocyte intracellular lipid accumulation, endoplasmic reticulum and mitochondrial stress, and insulin resistance, with associated changes in circulating adipokines, free fatty acids, and inflammatory mediators. In a study of insulin and fasting glucose and risk of recurrent colorectal adenomas, Flood et al. noted that patients with increased insulin and glucose are at higher risk of adenoma recurrence, and for those with increased glucose, the increase in risk for recurrence of advanced adenomas is even greater (Flood et al., 2007). Abundant data also showing that over expression of IGF-1 receptors on multiple human cancers, it is believed that the effects of insulin on cancer cell proliferation in vivo may involve an indirect mechanism, such as IGF-1 stimulation. Growth hormone is the primary stimulus for IGF-1 production in the liver and insulin can stimulate IGF-1 production by up-regulating growth hormone receptors in the liver. Hyperinsulinemia can also increase IGF-1 bioavailability by decreasing hepatic secretion of IGF-binding protein (IGFBP)-1 and -2 (Cowey and Hardy, 2006). IGF-1 has important proliferative and anti-apoptotic effects in tumorigenesis. Angiogenesis is also stimulated by IGF-1 because it increases vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) production, which has been shown in breast and colon cancer cell lines. Activation of the IGF-1 receptor also stimulates the p21 ras/MAPK pathway for cell proliferation and the PI3K/Akt cell survival pathway (Hoeben et al., 2004; Ibrahim and Yee, 2004). Hyperinsulinemia and IGF-1 are also believed to inhibit the synthesis of the sex hormone-binding globulin (SHBG), increasing levels of free sex hormones and promoting sex hormone-dependent cancers such as breast, endometrial, and prostate cancers (Calle and Kaaks, 2004). Also increasing evidence exists now that castration therapies used in prostate cancer may lead to hyperinsulinemia and raises concern for potential recurrence risk (Smith et al., 2006). Thus, hyperinsulinemia has been linked to neoplastic proliferation of various organ cells.

**SOLUBLE SYNDECANS AND TUMOR**

Expression of syndecans and the structure of their hapanar sulfate is changed during development (Sun et al., 1988) and in transformed epithelial (Inki and Jalkanen, 1996; Bayer-Garnet, 2001) are associated with an epithelial-mesenchymal
transformation with attendant alterations in cell morphology, motility, growth and differentiation.

These changes play important roles in tumor pathophysiology (Beauvais and Rapraeger, 2004; Sanderson, 2001; Fears and Woods, 2006). It has been suggested that syndecan-1 is involved in Wnt-1 induced tumor in the mouse mammary gland (Alexander et al., 2000). It has been found that syndecan-1 promotes the metastases in lung squamous carcinoma cells (Hirabayashi et al., 1998). The overexpression of syndecan-1 expression has been observed in various cancer such as pancreatic (Conejo et al., 2000), gastric (Wiksten et al., 2001) and breast (Stanley et al., 1999; Barbareshi et al., 2003; Burbach et al., 2003) carcinomas.

Interestingly, a number of papers have been published to indicate syndecan-1 is an inhibitor of carcinogenesis. Decrease of syndecan-1 expression is associated with epithelial cancers and in pre-malignant lesions of the oral mucosa (Soukka et al., 2000) and uterine cervix (Inki et al., 1994a; Nakashita et al., 1999; Rintala et al., 1999). Tumor progression is found when syndecan expression is normalized (Hirabayashi et al., 1998; Sanderson, 2001; Numa et al., 2002). Loss of syndecan-1 correlates with a reduced survival in squamous cell carcinoma of the head, neck and lung (Inki et al., 1994b; Nackaerts et al., 1997; Anttonen et al., 1999), laryngeal cancer (Pulkkinen et al., 1997; Klatka, 2002), multiple myeloma (Sanderson and Borset, 2002), malignant mesothelioma (Kumar-Singh et al., 1998) and a high metastatic potential in hematopoietic and colorectal carcinomas (Levy et al., 1996; Levy et al., 1997; Matsumoto et al., 1997; Fujiya et al., 2001). These controversies in the dual roles of syndecan-1 in tumorigenesis could be due to tissue- and tumor stage-specific functions of the protein.

Heparan sulphate-mediated binding of extracellular ligands is critical to the function of the syndecan. Strikingly, ectopic expression of syndecan-1 in syndecan-deficient melanoma cells prevented invasion, while the expression of other cell surface heparan sulfate proteoglycans (e.g., glypican) had little such effect, raising the importance of the binding characteristics between extracellular ligands and heparan sulfate. It has been found that there are variations in binding affinity of extracellular ligands to syndecans and the ligand-syndecan bindings are receptors. These results support the hypothesis that the syndecan family may not work as a classical receptor.

It is reasonable to propose that the syndecan functions as a core protein and its shed form. It has been identified that syndecan-1 can be shed by heparanase from the cell surface (Yang et al., 2007) via stimulation of ERK that leads to MMP-9, a syndecan-1 sheddase, expression (Purushothaman et al., 2008). A more recent study indicated that heparanase also regulates levels of syndecan-1 in the nucleus (Chen and Sanderson, 2009). A number of potential roles of heparan sulfate in the nucleus have been suggested for regulation of cell proliferation, inhibition of DNA topoisomerase I, inhibition of histone acetyltransferase (HAT), control of cell division, and nuclear localization of basic FGF (Fedarko et al., 1989; Kovalszky et al., 1998; Brockstedt et al., 2002; Dobra et al., 2003; Hsia et al., 2003). The shed syndecans via their heparin sulfate chains are active and working as a signaling mediators for cell-cell interaction, cell survival, cell migration (Couchman et al., 2001; Perrimon and Bernfield, 2001; Sanderson, 2001; Couchman, 2003; Beauvais and Rapraeger, 2004; Tkachenko et al., 2005). Interestingly, it has been found that insulin pro-motes shedding of syndecan ectodomain, suggesting a potential link between insulin signaling and syndecan-mediated cellular events such as cancer progression (Reizes et al., 2006).

**INSULIN LIKE GROWTH FACTOR AND CANCER**

Abundant data showing that overexpression of IGF-1 receptors has been implicated in the pathogenesis of many cancers. Recently, it has been found that syndecan-1 interacts with IGF-1 receptor to activate integrin (Beauvais and Rapraeger, 2010). It is reasonable to speculate insulin on cancer cell proliferation *in vivo* may involve an indirect mechanism, such as IGF-1 stimulation. Growth hormone is the primary stimulus for IGF-1 production in the liver and insulin can stimulate IGF-1 production by up-regulating growth hormone receptors in the liver. Hyperinsulinemia can also increase IGF-1 bioavailability by decreasing hepatic secretion of IGF-binding protein (IGFBP)-1 and -2 (Cowey and Hardy, 2006). IGF-1 has important proliferative and antiapoptotic effects in tumorigenesis. Angiogenesis is also stimulated by IGF-1 because it increases vascular endothelial growth factor (VEGF) production, which has been shown in breast and colon cancer cell lines. Activation of the IGF-1 receptor also stimulates the p21 ras/MAPK pathway for cell proliferation and the PI3K/Akt cell survival pathway (Hoeben et al., 2004; Ibrahim and Yee, 2004). Hyperinsulinemia and IGF-1 are also believed to inhibit the synthesis of the sex hormone-binding globulin (SHBG), increasing levels of free sex hormones and promoting sex hormone-dependent cancers such as breast, endometrial, and prostate cancers (Calle and Kaaks, 2004). Also increasing evidence exists now that castration therapies used in prostate cancer may lead to hyperinsulinemia and raises concern for potential recurrence risk (Smith et al., 2006). Thus, hyperinsulinemia has been linked to neoplastic proliferation of various organs.

Various epidemiological studies are indicating a link to insulin resistance or hyperinsulinemia with various epithelial cancers. Initial studies done in prostate cancer showed a correlation with plasma IGF-1 levels (Chan et al., 1998). Subsequently, various studies have confirmed high levels of IGF-1 and insulin levels associated with prostate cancer risk prospectively (Harman et al., 2000; Kaaks et al., 2003; Giovanucci et al., 2004). A link between breast cancer risk and hyperinsulinemia (measured by fasting C-peptide levels) has been shown mainly in postmenopausal breast cancer (Verheus et al., 2006). High insulin levels have also been shown to be associated with risk of endometrial cancer independent of estradiol (Gunter et al., 2008).

**DIABETES AND CANCER**

It has been suggested that men with type 2 diabetes are less likely than nondiabetic men to develop prostate cancer. Recent genetic studies have highlighted a potential genetic link between the two diseases. Two studies have identified a version (allele) of a variant in the HNF1B (also known as TCF2) gene that predisposes people to type 2 diabetes, and one of them showed that the same allele protects men from prostate cancer (Frayling et al., 2008). Colorectal carcinoma and type 2 diabetes mellitus share common risk factors and
Type 2 diabetes mellitus is associated with an increased risk of colorectal cancer. The increased risk occurs in both sexes (Yang et al., 2005; Berster and Goke, 2008). The hyperinsulinemia hypothesis is based on the premise that elevated plasma levels of insulin and free IGF-1 promote the proliferation of colon cells and confer a survival benefit upon transformed colon carcinoma cells. Chronic insulin therapy was associated with increased colorectal adenoma risk among type 2 diabetes mellitus patients (Yang et al., 2004; Chung et al., 2008). It has also been reported that Type 1 diabetes is associated cancer risk in a population-based study (Zendehdel et al., 2003). It is well accepted that inflammation is closely associated with diabetes: TNF-α converting enzyme (TACE) activity as well as TNF-α is increased in diabetic patients (Fornoni et al., 2008; Monroy et al., 2009). Considering the fact that shedding of syndecan-1 is paralleled by TNF-α release, it is possible that diabetes could be lead to cancer development via TACE and TNF-α system (Andrian et al., 2005).
Kim and Raman.

S Syndecan as a Messenger to Link Diabetes and Cancer

PROSPECTIVES
A significant body of evidence supports the possibility of connection between diabetes and cancer: a hypothetical model of syndecan signaling is proposed in Fig. 2. It will be necessary to clarify the potential role of syndecans in the progression of cancer with diabetes. Interactions between syndecans and insulin receptor, IGF-1 receptor, IRS-1 and integrin may be important players for syndecans to induce cancer via diabetes. These research will eventually provide promise for the rational design of new drugs that will prevent and/or treat cancer as well as metabolic syndromes induced by insulin resistance such as osteoporosis, periodontal diseases and diabetes mediated bone destruction.

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